



ROAD TO NIRVANA

THE KUNMING DHARANI PILLAR

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Photography by Mao Di



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Cover picture: Head of Dhrtarastra, The Heavenly
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Introduction

The main courtyard of the Kunming Municipal Museum houses one of the most original art-works from the time of the Dali Kingdom (937-1253 CE) in Yunnan. It is called the Dharani Pillar of the Dizang Temple. It is a stone pillar a little over six meters high, in the shape of a pagoda, on whose surface some of the most beautiful Buddhist sculptures of China have been carved. It is a pillar full of symbolism that shows a distinctive spiritual conception of the universe, in which Buddhist devotees are expected to find a path that leads from ignorance to enlightenment, in the transit between life and death, especially the general Gao, for whom it was built.

The history of the pillar is quite interesting. It was originally built at the beginning of the thirteenth century as a funerary monument for General Gao, a scion of one of the most prominent families of the time. Then it stood for centuries at the entrance of a Dizang temple established on the outskirts of Kunming. With the destruction of the temple in the late nineteenth century, the pillar remained, abandoned. A surviving monk from the old community obtained permission to make a quest to surround it with a fence. The disloyalty of a novice, who took off with the funds collected, forced the poor monk to go to the police. They took charge of the case and finished the fence in 1920. Later, the pillar formed part of the courtyard of a factory and part of a public garden, until a museum was built around it to correctly protect and exhibit it.

Unfortunately, although this monument occupies a prominent place in the history of the art of China and Southeast Asia, its existence goes unnoticed by most travellers. It is not usually mentioned in guidebooks or tourist brochures and a visit is not regularly included in the programs of travel agencies.

Though its existence is rarely highlighted in popular books, some academic studies published in recent decades provide scholarly circles with interesting insights about its value and significance. The pioneering study was carried out by Louis Finot and Victor Goloubew

("Le Fan-tseu t'a de Yunnanfou") and published in the *Bulletin de l' Ecole Francaise d' Extreme Orient* in 1925. It is an introduction to the history of the pillar and a detailed description of its main elements, with identifications of the Buddhist sculptures and a discussion of their iconographic attributes. The two articles written by Angela Falco Howard, an expert researcher in Chinese sculpture, are much more recent and important when it comes to assessing the role of this masterpiece in the Chinese and Asian sculpture of its time. In her first article (1996) she says that the pillar is a representative of the border culture of the Kingdom of Dali. She discovers influences that relate it to China, Tibet, India and the cultures of Southeast Asia. In the second article (1997), after a description of its most important elements, she focuses on identifying the main characters that took part in its creation. She frames the work in the Buddhist currents of the time, and stresses its distinctiveness with respect to other similar pillars found in China. She emphasizes that this is actually a funerary monument of the Bai ethnic group, which would reflect a world of beliefs different from those that could be found in the rest of China.

Given that these studies have hardly contributed to making this important monument known to the people, that many of their ideas can only be understood by readers with a basic knowledge of Yunnan history and Buddhist symbolism, and that the conditions for cultural diffusion have been greatly facilitated by the emergence of the digital world, we decided to take a few photographs of the monument and present them to the public with a few brief explanations, in the hope of helping to introduce this almost unknown masterpiece to those interested in Buddhism, Chinese culture and the arts in general.

We are convinced that the structure and elements of the pillar are much more than a magnificent work of art. When they are framed in the Buddhist beliefs of the time and in the artistic traditions of the Buddhist world, they will convey separate sets of secret communications that will appeal to sages, nobles and laymen, providing paths to enlightenment, transcendence and the salvation of the soul. When the study of this pillar is explained in the light the religion and politics of the ancient Yunnan, 800 years ago, it will reveal interesting aspects of the

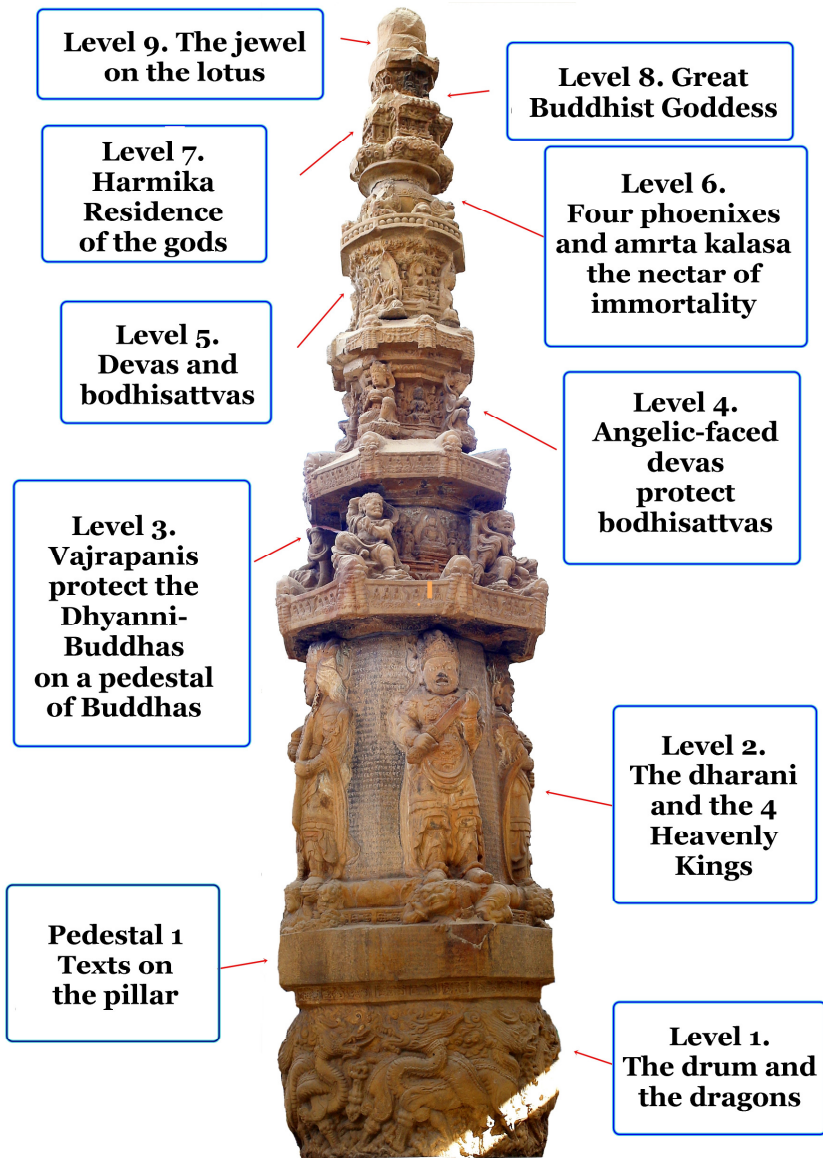
nature of the Kingdom of Dali, of its ruling elite and of the religion they practiced.

In this brief study my interest in culture is mixed, as in all of my books, with the desire to make it accessible and intelligible to a non-specialist reader. I wish to allow the many visitors that Kunming receives to value a magnificent work of art that usually goes unnoticed. Last, I hope to introduce to the general public the existence of this unique work, helping them to enter the complex symbolic world it shows.

To this end, we will try to make comprehensible its main elements and its rich symbolism, framing the pillar in the nature of the Buddhist constructions of the time and in the cultural and religious background of the Dali Kingdom. I will briefly describe the history of Yunnan at the time, the struggles for power among its elites. We will discuss the importance of religion as a factor of political legitimacy, both at the national level, the Kingdom of Dali against China and other countries, and at the local level, the Gao family against the Duan royal family.

We will show that in tune with the Buddhist tradition, the pillar proposes a path, a spiritual progression. We will identify for the readers the main deities present on it, and we will compare it with other religious constructions, whose shape, an ascending pyramid with well defined levels, is related. Similarities between the pillar and the imaginary constructions of mandalas and visualizations of Mount Meru will provide us with a deeper understanding of its religious value. Its references to complex sets of values will help to identify the environment in which it was erected, because only when one understands the culture of a country is one in a position to really appreciate its arts.

I would like to thank the kind staff of the museum for helping me to understand some important aspects of this monument.







1. Contextualizing the Dharani Pillar

In order to have a general idea of the time and environment in which the Dharani Pillar was built, we will start this work with a brief introduction to the Kingdom of Dali, to the Buddhism of the time, to the main religious monuments that could be related to the pillar and to the origin and function of *dharani* pillars.

The Dali Kingdom

The Dharani Pillar of Kunming dates to the last years of the Dali Kingdom, a kingdom established in the province of Yunnan in the tenth century by nobles of the Bai ethnic group. It was roughly contemporary with the Song dynasty of China. Its capital was the city of Dali, which today still preserves many of its ancient monuments. A secondary capital was the current city of Kunming. This kingdom is generally considered the heir of the Nanzhao Kingdom, established in the same area from 738 to 902. Both ruled over practically the same territory, almost the entirety of Yunnan province and approximately over the same population. They shared similar religious beliefs, an uninterrupted artistic tradition and *"their institutions, economy, and culture also seem to have remained basically the same"* (Backus 1981:161). Both kingdoms achieved great prosperity due to the trade in salt, tea, and horses with the neighboring countries, as Yunnan was from primitive times the most important trade hub on the routes connecting China, Tibet, Southeast Asia and India. The Kingdom of Dali finally disappeared in 1253, when Kublai Khan arrived to conquer Yunnan with a powerful army of 100.000 soldiers.

The continuous trade relationship between the Dali Kingdom and other countries was accompanied by cultural exchanges and mutual influences. In this way, the kings of Dali had at their hands a variegated set of religious elements, which they used to legitimate themselves as rulers and to emphasize the cultural differences of their country, its religious preeminence and its political independence. In this way, they

created in Yunnan an eclectic regional center in which elements from the major cultures of Asia were blended with distinctive local contributions.



While Buddhist religion was the central aspect of the spiritual lives of the people, foreign influences blended with local beliefs to create religious schools with distinctive characteristics. Yunnan Buddhism was imbued with images and ideas from different parts of Asia, as each of the neighboring countries Dali practiced a different type of Buddhism, and images, figures, missionaries and objects of worship arrived from each of these countries.

Throughout the last period of the Kingdom of Nanzhao and the Dali Kingdom, the kings had a very close relationship with Buddhism. According to their legends, the ascension to the throne of the first rulers of Nanzhao was confirmed by some Buddhist miracles. It was normal to have Buddhist advisors, several of them praised for their religious fervor. One of the genealogies of the reigning family related it to the great king

Asoka of India, who stood out in the 3rd century BCE for his defense of Buddhism.

It is possible that Buddhism was used as a class differentiator between the aristocracy gathered around the central government nucleus in Dali and the "barbarian" peoples located farther away. Buddhism identified this aristocracy also with the rulers of civilized countries such as China, Tibet and the kingdoms of Southeast Asia. The distribution of Buddhist relics, temples and pagodas, concentrated around the two main centers of power, Dali and Kunming, also suggests that Buddhism was a religion of the elites. Religious patronage was closely linked to political power, and it is known that both the royal family of Dali and the next in importance, the Gao, carried out an intense work of monastery construction centered in their respective power bases, the cities of Dali and Kunming.

The most widespread variety of Buddhism in the Kingdom of Dali was the Mahayana school practiced in China. However, Dali Buddhism also shows influences from the esoteric Buddhism developed in Tibet, from the Theravada school extended throughout Southeast Asia. Important iconographic contributions came from India, as well as elements taken from local indigenous traditions. The result was the creation of a local religious school known as Acharya Buddhism, which shows a multinational mix of concepts adapted to local varieties of shamanism and nature cults.

This complex religious situation reflected the political expectations of Yunnan elites, who, as Megan Bryson (2016) points out: *"adopted most of their Buddhist texts from Chinese territory [but], they embraced Indian Buddhist images and claimed Indian origins for their Buddhist tradition. Moreover, it was their worship of distinctive deities with Indian iconography that distinguished their Buddhist tradition from that of Tang and Song China. This emphasis on India did not just stem from India's prestige as Buddhism's birthplace, but also from Dali's position in relation to China. While Nanzhao and Dali rulers could not claim equality with Chinese rulers as Sons of Heaven, [and in many official texts they present themselves as younger brothers of the emperors], their relative proximity to India meant that they could claim superiority as Buddhist monarchs."*

The religious and political context of the time and place where the pillar was erected make it unique in China, the pillar with the more varied symbolism and the richer and better-executed decoration. It could be seen as a symbol of the religious centrality of the Kingdom of Dali, as it is a central pillar that propagates its sacred message (dharani) in all four directions, like the prayer flags of the Tibetan world.

As with many religious buildings, this pillar could be considered a world axis: a point that opens communication between heaven and earth, making the territory around sacred. The fact that its construction was carried out by the members of the Gao family, the second most important after the Duan royal family, points to the reality that this family was already the most powerful of the Dali Kingdom, and it is possible that it heralded a future dynastic change. The rivalry between these two families, and the contradictions inherent to the existence of dual centers of power in the Dali Kingdom, was manifested at the arrival of the Mongolian invaders of Kublai Khan. For when the first Mongolian ambassadors asked for the surrender of Dali, the mighty minister Gao killed them and set out to resist. However, despite that offense, when Kublai Khan finally entered Dali, he did not punish the city or the Duan royal family, keeping some of its members in government positions.



BUDDHIST SCHOOLS

China: Mahayana Buddhism or Great Vehicle

It is characterized by the devotion to a series of saints saviors, and by sophisticated philosophies that developed deepening the implications of early teachings. In China emerged several branches, the most important of which are:

Chan or Zen Buddhism. It proposes to reach enlightenment in a sudden way. With great influence on Yunnan.

Huayan Buddhism. It emphasizes achieving concentration and penetrating vision with the study of the sutras.

Pure Land Buddhism. It assures that it is enough to pronounce the name of Amithaba when dying with all faith to be reborn in paradise: The Pure Land of the West.

Tibet: Esoteric Buddhism or Vajrayana

It shows more complex rituals, often associated with magical practices and secret symbols considered powerful

Yunnan: Acharya Buddhism

Monks live in their own homes and not in monasteries, and being deeply influenced by local varieties of shamanism, they make extensive use of magic, talismans, charms, and incantations.

India: Birth and development

Buddhism originated in India, where it experienced its early development and where the main schools surged, later transmitted to other countries.

Southeast Asia: Theravada Buddhism

Or the school of the ancients, is almost clean of ritual, more in keeping with the original teachings of Buddha. For the believers of this school, there are no saints and Sakyamuni was a person who reached Nirvana, a model to follow.

Based on a map of
www.mapcruzin.com

Stupas, pagodas, mandalas and *Dharani* Pillars

Even people familiar with the various types of Buddhist monuments may be surprised to hear about a Dharani Pillar. Some will wonder what it exactly its meaning, why is so called, and what is the relationship between this pillar and other Buddhist monuments. In the past, this monument was called a stupa or a pagoda and it has characteristics that relate it to stupas, pagodas, mandalas and other *dharani* pillars. We will depict briefly the distinctive elements of these types of buildings.

Stupa

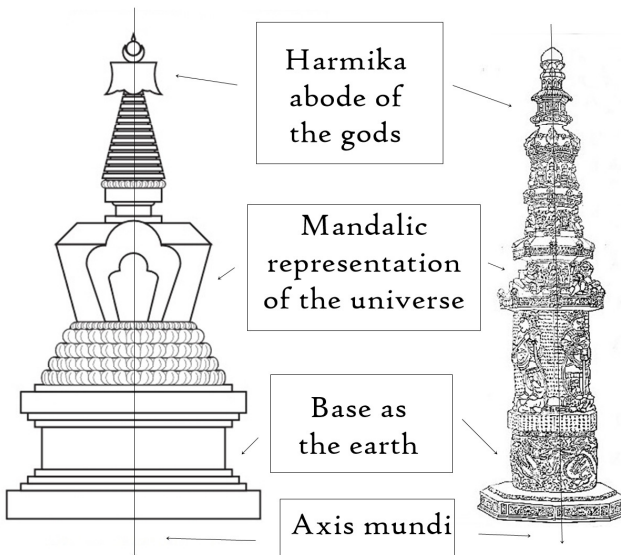
Stupas are funerary monuments built to guard the relics of Buddha or his disciples. They rise on a platform, sometimes square that represents the earth, with a hemispherical structure that represents the celestial vault. In the upper part they have a cubicle where the divine presence lives called *harmika*, and they are crowned by a parasol that symbolizes the axis of the universe. Believers revere the gods enshrined in the stupa by entering from the east side and circumambulating it in clockwise direction.

Stupas evolved in North Asia as pagodas, appearing in Nepal in the sixth century and years later in China, where they become very popular. In South Asia they evolved as representations of the universe, symbolizing Buddha's entrance into Nirvana. For this reason they show, to the Buddhist believer, a path to



enlightenment and salvation. Stupas vary in size, the most striking example of this kind of southern stupas is the temple of Borobudur in Java, dating from around 800 CE (Dallapiccola 2004).

DHARANI PILLAR - STUPA



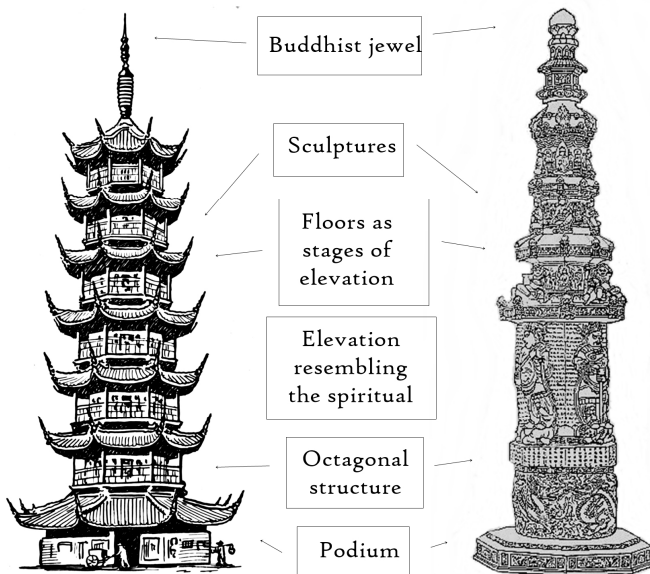
The pillar of Kunming was formerly called “Stupa with Indian text” (梵字塔 or *fan zi ta*). Since most stupas have four sides, while *dharani* pillars have eight, and the Kunming pillar has eight sides on some levels and seems to have four in others, Finot and Goloubew think that it must be considered a stupa. They propose that it is a *cailiya*, a kind of stupa.

Pagoda

Pagodas are funeral monuments, sometimes octagonal in shape, representing the eightfold path that points out the moral conduct to be followed in order to achieve liberation. Full of religious symbolism, their elevated form represents the spiritual elevation to which the believer aspires, while their structure composed of ascending floors points out to the degrees of meditative evolution needed to become a Bodhisattva (Sirtori 1994).

PAGODA - DHARANI PILLAR

Both are funerary monuments



The shapes of the pillars and the pagodas are very similar. The main difference resides in their religious functions. While pagodas serve to house the relics of the Buddha, saints or elevated monks, *dharani* pillars are centered on a sacred scripture. As this sacred dharani is carved to help the soul of the deceased to not reincarnate in one of the lowest states of existence, both monuments are related to death and to after death experiences. In Liu Shufen's exhaustive study (1997) of the *dharani* pillars in China, differences between pillars and pagodas are blurred, as he has demonstrated that pagodas can host Buddhist texts, that there were *dharani* pillars that housed relics (one of the functions of pagodas), and that in the past some of the buildings now called *dharani* pillars (幢 or *chuang*) were called pagodas (塔 or *ta*). Since the shape of pillars resembles that of pagodas, we could say with Mister Liu that the dharani pillar is a type of sculpted pagoda. Since pagodas are an evolution of stupas, we could certainly say also that the Kunming pillar is a kind of stupa.

The *dharani* pillars

The Buddhist stone pillars are funerary monuments that emerged during the time of the Tang dynasty in China. They are called *chuang* (幢) in Chinese, usually translated as “pillar,” because it is thought that they are a stone representation of the ancient banners that were hung in the temples from a central wooden bar.

The *chuang* banners, also called the banners of victory, are one of the eight treasures of Buddhism, symbolizing the Buddha's victory over the demon Mara and his temptations: passion, fear of death, pride, lasciviousness, and so on. According to legend, the first of these banners was erected by Buddha on Mount Meru to mark his victory over the demons. They are widely used in Chinese temples, which generally have two of them next to the entrance of each hall. They are much more abundant in Tibetan ones, which can be characterized by a large number of banners of victory within their main halls.

The construction of this type of banner, in stone, on the top of mountains or buildings, imitates the mythical action of Buddha and converts the area under their influence into Buddhist territory. The origin of the transformation of the cloth banners into stone ones is explained in a legend that says that in ancient times a prince received a prophecy that announced to him that he would reincarnate many times in the lower states of existence. Because according to Buddhist teachings every person after death reincarnates in another form following a continuous cycle of existences that only ends at reaching Nirvana. Horrified at that prospect, as these lower states (the animal world, the world of hungry ghosts and the worlds of torment) are characterized by continuous suffering, he begged the powerful god Indra to intercede before Sakyamuni to avoid this sad fate. Listening to his pleading Sakyamuni then declared that anyone who recited the dharani or recorded it on a pillar at the top of a mountain or at the top of a building or stupa, would be saved from suffering the negative transmigration of his soul after death, cleansed from all moral pollution and could reach longevity (Howard 1997: 34).

Most of the *dharani* pillars, consist only, as their name suggests, of a pillar on which a dharani is engraved. A dharani is a charm, a magical text with religious powers. Buddhists believe they possess supernatural powers when being recited or borne and were incorporated into sutras as dharani-sutras. Since their main purpose was to help someone avoid reincarnation in one of the miserable states of existence they are primarily funeral monuments. This shows that the most important element in these pillars is not the magnificent sculptures that characterize the one exhibited in Kunming, but the text engraved in its surface: The charm (dharani) that can lead to salvation. Although they are usually written in Chinese, they only reproduce the original pronunciation. Sometimes this same charm is repeated over and over again on the monument surface. The most frequently used are the *Usnisa Vijaya Dharani* or *Dharani Purifying All Evil Path*, the *Dharani of Great Compassion*, the *Dharani-sutra of the King Protector of the Country*, among others.

The pillars have evolved over the course of time. When they first appeared, the structures were simple. They generally had a single level with little decoration and a moderate height of two-three meters. Later on, they adopted a multi-level structure and the decoration tended to become more complex. Many were covered by a hanging canopy, and the sacred text was sometimes accompanied by a variable number of Buddhist sculptures (always few). In the south of China, these sculptures were more frequent and elaborate being distributed over several floors, giving the pillars the shape of a pagoda. In the end, most of them were octagonal buildings and their upper part was engraved with statues and niches. This could suggest a conscious confluence between the shape of pillars and that of pagodas.

In general, the more elaborate pillars, mostly built during the Song Dynasty, share a number of characteristics: an octagonal base that decreases in size with the height, animals, dragons or lions decorating its base, as well as a series of sculptures placed at different levels. Most of them culminated in a pavilion and in the pinnacle the jewel of Buddhism placed on a lotus. All of them must necessarily have engraved on their surfaces the dharani that gives their name; otherwise, it will be a little stupa or another Buddhist monument.

In the most complex pillars, this structure reflects the entire Buddhist universe, allowing the observer to ascend from the lower part, protected by lions, dragons or the four heavenly kings, to the intermediate part where the Buddhist charms are shown, and end at the summit, sometimes with a pavilion as the *harmika*, where the jewel on the lotus symbolizes both the capacity to satisfy all desires and the perfection of Buddhist doctrine. This double meaning fits perfectly into this monument, guaranteeing a fortunate reincarnation.



Details of the Hangzhou's Dharani pillar

The pillar as a mandala

A **mandala** is a symbolic representation of the universe, common to the religions of India, a spiritual and ritual construction in which geometric planes representing the cosmos, the macrocosm and microcosm, are visualized for the benefit of the believer. The basic form of most mandalas is a square with four gates containing a circle with a center point. Mandalas may be employed as instruments of religious teaching, focusing the attention of practitioners and adepts, as a spiritual guidance tool, for establishing a sacred space and as an aid to meditation and trance.

There are bidimensional and tridimensional representations of mandalas. The most common are drawings of mandalas used for the practitioner as a help in meditation. But mandalas are also represented in stupas. In a mandala, the believer moves metaphorically from outside to inside, and identifies himself with the central deity, to approach the goal of perfect understanding or enlightenment. The mandalas show a road through which the spirit will move to attain the highest states of consciousness that characterize Buddhist teachings.

There are different types of mandalas. Among them, the description of the so-called World Womb Mandala fits surprisingly well with the iconography of this pillar. This kind of mandala is based on the Vairocana Sutra. It is characterized by the central presence of the Buddha Vairocana and groups of eight Bodhisattvas in different compositions around him. These mandalas are seated on an eight-leaf lotus, from which it unfolds in 12 sections, each containing a central deity and assistants, symbolizing aspects in the process of spiritual development.

The complexity of the symbols expressed in the Kunming pillar correspond to the layout of a World Womb Mandala. The pillar contains the Vairocana Sutra, in has the central presence of Vairocana Buddha. It is a representation of the world in ascending levels based on an eight-leaf lotus, from which it unfolds in 12 sections, each containing a central deity and assistants, symbolizing different aspects of Buddhist path to liberation.

The pillar as a path

This pillar, therefore, speaks to us of a path, of a progression, in this case no longer of a living person, but of the soul of a dead person. The path begins in hell and must end in paradise. The road, the path is one the fundamental aspects of Buddhist teaching, which does not show Buddha Sakyamuni as a god, but as a human being who reached Nirvana. He was a historical character who taught a way of salvation that everyone can follow. In fact primitive representations of Buddha showed only his footprints, the

**THE PILLAR AS
A WORLD WOMB
MANDALA**

Central deity
with assistants

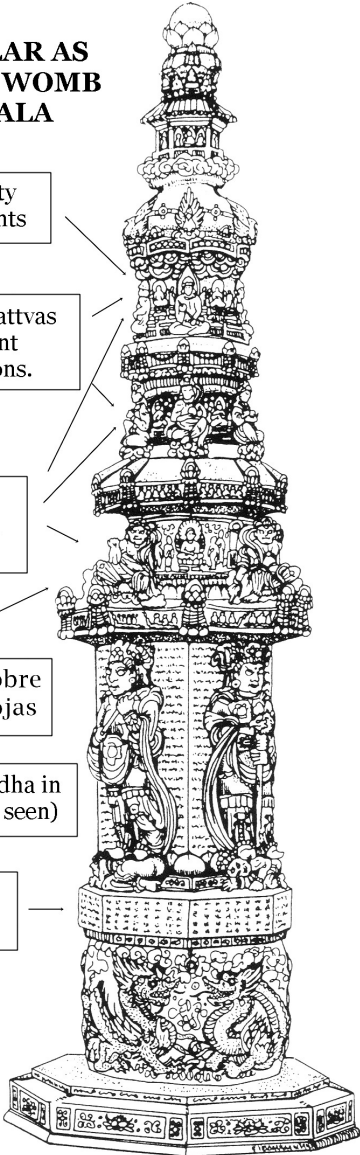
Eight bodhisattvas
in different
compositions.

12 sections:
3 levels with
four niches

Asentado sobre
loto de 8 hojas

Vairocana Buddha in
the center (not seen)

Vairocana
Sutra



footsteps that must be followed on the path to enlightenment. The idea of Buddhist religious practice is that one will follow a path with one's own effort. This path, as the pillar shows, ascends like a spiral, through a



series of steps that strengthen the believer's power. The path begins in the undifferentiated waters of the ocean, takes the teachings written in the second level, pass through the Buddhist examples embodied in the sculptures of the saints and saviors and ends in paradise.

Since this is a funerary monument showing a road, it could be associated with the paintings called "Way to Heaven", at one time common in China. They are still in use among the Naxi ethnic, who live not far from the Bai. They also resemble the "Journeys through Hell" of the Chinese tradition. In both cases, the narrative graphically depicts the soul of the deceased passing through the different phases of purgatory in which he is redeemed from the sins committed, to begin once cleared of guilt the ascension to paradise and the reincarnation. In the pillar the sins are absent; who would dare to point out those of such a mighty one? But the ascension, perhaps in a spiral, along the path indicated from its

lower levels to the higher ones, marks an obvious parallelism with the last stages of the Naxi's "Road to Heaven".

This pillar

This pillar is unique among *dharani* pillars. While most of them are centered on sacred texts, and only a few have carved sculptures, in the Kunming one, the central part has developed enormously to contain more than 300 Buddhist sculptures, some of them authentic works of art that stand out for their own merit among the sculptures of the time.

The Kunming pillar was carved and erected for the benefit of General Gao Mingsheng. The Gao were one of the most important families of the Dali Kingdom, and since the very foundation of the regime in the 10th century, successive generations of Gaos had occupied important positions near the kings. The pillar must have been erected between 1200 and 1220, after the death of Gao Mingsheng, because his Chinese text associates a series of cosmic disasters with the death of the general. Moreover, it is clearly a way of showing the family's power and of keeping its memory alive for posterity.

The Gao family were also, in some ways, the most immediate rivals of the kings of the Duan dynasty, with whom they were united in a political way. Many members of the Gao clan acting as prime ministers, and familiar relationship, with frequent marriages between members of the two families. At the beginning of the 13th century, when the pillar was erected, the family Gao was, in fact, the holders of the political power. The rivalries between the two families extended to religious construction and possibly to temple control.

Throughout the 12th century, members of the Gao family sponsored several large-scale Buddhist projects in the center of Yunnan. This shows that this pillar, far from being considered the work of a noble individual, can be compared to works made under royal patronage, and points out to the establishment of a political power centered in the Kunming area. To establish a Buddhist monument is to open a communication with heaven, with the spirit world, and this can only be done by a person who already has power on earth.

But at the same time, the pillar, erected by Prime Minister Yuan, put an end to the political uncertainties that arose after Gao's death

during the minority of the new sovereign, is a truce, a compromise between the two families.

The Dharani Pillar shows the political and religious contradictions that took place in the Kingdom of Dali. In its efforts to embody artistic traditions that emphasize the originality of Yunnan culture, it moved away from the shape of *dharani* pillars in China. Taking fashionable artistic elements of nearby countries helped create a unique work of art, completely different of those erected in other places for the same purposes.

This pillar is a reflection of a world and an epoch. It can help us to understand the religion and the politics of the Dali Kingdom, and the religious concepts that animated it, especially those related to death. As the sum of artistic elements taken from the four cardinal points, it points out to a vision of the world that considers Yunnan as its center. Its symbolism also points to the centrality of the Buddhist doctrines practiced in Yunnan.

For all these reasons, the pillar should be considered the symbol of the city of Kunming, because, like the city, it expresses a intermediary situation between China, Tibet, and Southeast Asia.





2. Description of the pillar

The Kunming Dharani Pillar is a sculpted block of stone with a conical shape 6.7 meters high. It is divided into nine sections that decrease in width as it becomes taller, giving it a shape similar to that of a small pagoda. Each of these nine levels rests on an octagonal cornice, which serves both as a separation between levels and as a base for each level's main sculptures. These cornices generally have groups of Buddhas sculpted in them. The figures of the niches of each level rise, in turn, on lotus thrones. In fact, in each of the central levels, which show Buddhist images, there are two blocks of sculptures. One is the outer block, usually of celestial kings and other protective deities, which rests on the octagonal base. The other is the inner block, with the *dharani* charms in the main level, and with twelve niches containing figures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas with their assistants, on the upper levels. On each level, a similar idea is repeated, in which guardians, outside, protect the sacred images or texts inside. But regardless of their religious value, these protectors, by their size, expression and the care taken in their execution, take on artistic prominence, leaving among them, more attached to the stone of the pillar itself, Buddhist images that may go unnoticed at first sight.

The existence of an octagonal base is related to the importance of the number eight in the Buddhist tradition. Buddhist believers are expected to follow the Eightfold Path, there are eight main Bodhisattvas, the wheel of destiny that Sakyamuni handles has eight spokes, the lotus flower associated with Vairocana, one of the most important Buddhas, has eight petals. Pagodas usually have an octagonal shape. Eight also refers to the four primary and secondary directions, towards which the main figures of the pillar are aligned. This is a number frequently used in Buddhist mandalas, and specially in the World Womb Mandala.

THE EIGHTFOLD PATH OF BUDDHISM

The Eightfold Path refers to a set of rules that the Buddhist believer must follow in order to achieve his inner harmony as well as that of society.



Level 1. The Dragons Drum.

The entire structure of the pillar now rests on an octagonal base decorated with floral motifs. It was added as a protection in 1987, but corresponds precisely to the succession of octagonal cornices separating each of its levels. In reality, there are two bases, a larger one, below, about 20 cm tall. It has three sections on each side, with the central one a lotus and those of the sides, some flowers. There is also a smaller base on top of the lower.

Over the base, there is a drum-shaped structure not completely round, with a series of dragons intertwined between water and clouds. Since the Heavenly Kings in the next level are situated facing the four cardinal points, the mouths of every two dragons face each other in the four secondary cardinal points. Despite the apparent regularity of this design, each pair of dragons relates differently. Their bodies are confronted, while each one's tail is intertwined with the next one, reaching their ends to the body of the next dragon in such a way that the four dragons end up being united under a sea of clouds.

In Buddhism, the dragon is the vehicle of Vairocana, the white Buddha of the center. He is the main deity of this pillar, whose presence permeates the whole monument. Being the Buddha of the Interior, he is not seen but is always present. As he is usually depicted mounted on a dragon, those of the first level surely mark his presence. Dragons are powerful symbols in Buddhism. They are associated with the Naga snakes, which, according to Hindu tradition, inhabit the seas and are located at the foot of the sacred Mount Meru. Being aquatic creatures, they are not malignant deities, but, due to their control of clouds and waters, they can bring benefits to people.



Nagas are worshipped as protectors of the Buddha's Law. They play an important role in the legends related to Gautama Buddha, as they assisted him in his first bath, listened to his main sermons and are shown sheltering the Buddha while meditating. Moreover, as the Nagas are serpents, and shed their skins annually, they are a symbol of immortality. It is possible that the dragons on this pedestal fulfill four functions: to identify the ocean on which Mount Meru is sustained; to point out the presence of Vairoçana; to act as protectors of the Buddhist deities and to be symbols of immortality.

The presence of dragons in the oceans and of birds at the top of the pillar suggests that it represents the Mount Meru rising from the waters of the Great Ocean. Mount Meru (or Sumeru) of Hindu mythology is a golden mountain at the center of the universe, is an axis that connects heaven and earth. It is the abode of the gods, who due to their presence on this mountain can be both in the heaven and in the earth. Mount Meru rises from the depths of the ocean and reaches the skies. As the abode of the gods, it is situated somewhere beyond the physical plane of reality, in a realm of perfection and transcendence. For this reason symbolic representations of Mount Meru are commonly found in mandalas. In the spiritual plane one could say that Mount Meru has its foot in hell and its summit in heaven. The ascent of Mount Meru, like the progression through the stages of a mandala, is a path of salvation, of spiritual perfection and enlightenment. In this pillar, as in most mandalas, Mount Meru shows a path to paradise.

Level 2. The *dharani* and the Four Heavenly Kings

Level two is the most important part of the Dharani Pillar. The *dharani* charm that will protect the soul after death is engraved here, where, in turn, it is protected by the Four Heavenly Kings. These are the largest and most beautiful sculptures, so this part is both the artistic and religious center of the pillar. It is separated from the drum-shaped level by an octagonal baseboard, where several Chinese texts are engraved.

The most important of these texts explains how this pillar came to be erected. Moreover, there are three texts of a religious nature. They include excerpts from the Heart Sutra, the Four General Vows of the Bodhisattva, and the vow of Vairocana. The Heart Sutra and the four vows of Bodhisattva constitute the core of the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism. Their importance is such that monks recite them every day during their prayers. The Heart Sutra, brief and profound, contains ideas entirely suited to a funerary motif, such as:

*This Body itself is Emptiness
and Emptiness itself is this Body.
This Body is not other than Emptiness
and Emptiness is not other than this Body.
The same is true of Feelings,
Perceptions, Mental Formations,
and Consciousness.
All phenomena bear the mark of Emptiness;
their true nature is the nature of
no Birth no Death,
no Being no Non-being,*

Ending with:

*Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone all together
beyond, awoken, all hail.
(Translation of Thich Nhat Hanh.*

The Four Great Vows of the Bodhisattva are as follows:

*No matter how numerous the sentient beings are,
I vow to save them all.
However numerous the passions may be,
I vow to defeat them all.
However numerous the dharmas may be,
I vow to acquire them all.
No matter how perfect the Buddha's Way is,
I vow to make it happen.*

The Vow of Vairocana represents late esoteric beliefs. Being present but not visible, Vairocana embodies the Buddhist concept of emptiness. In Buddhist traditions, he is considered a vehicle of salvation, who has the duty to combat evil and to take charge of the soul after death. Sometimes he is called The Great Illuminator.

Regarding the story that tells how the pillar came to be built, translated into English by Angela Howard. There are some aspects especially interesting for the western reader, such as:

1. The relationship between the origin of the Minister Yuan, who ordained the erection of the pillar for General Gao, and the creation of the world: "*In the beginning [there was] the primeval force; yin and yang were divided; sun, moon, and stars embellished the vault of heaven; the five holy mountains guarded over the land majestically. [Likewise, Minister Yuan] rose from the common with great prominence and wisdom, distinguished the role between sovereign and minister, took possession of the eight regions of the land, and obtained firm control of the four seas*" (Howard 1997: 69).

2. The relationship between the death of the general Gao and cosmic disasters: "*Alas! [Because of the death of General Gao Mingsheng], the four great elements (Earth, Water, Fire, Ether) were deprived of a master; the five*

aggregates (Form, Sensation, Perception, Karmic Impulse, Consciousness) are all empty of coming and going; Heaven and earth suddenly become unkind; and the great fortune of the country unexpectedly turns ominous (in other words, with the General's death the universe also loses its balance). How sad it is! Thick clouds of sorrow permeate Heaven completely; reckless rain of grief covers the mountains entirely. In the land of Chu joyful sounds are silenced, [Shanchan/Kunming] the eastern capital [of the Dali Kingdom] is plunged into darkness" (Howard 1997: 70).

3. The reason for building the pillar: *"This excellent Buddhist layman [Gao] will experience transmigration seven times. [To prevent this fate], the Tathagatha preached [the following] superior doctrine. The wise way of mourning consists of building an Usni-sa Vijaya [Dharani] Precious Pillar. When one erects it and fills in the boundaries, the iron-encircling mountains become the land of bliss. [When one builds the pillar] in a burial ground, hell is transformed into a lotus (symbol of transcendental rebirth), one reaches the sacred field of enlightenment and quickly assembles in the luminous land of eternal stillness (Nirvana)" (Howard 1997: 71).*

"Hell is transformed into a lotus" is perhaps the key to understanding all the elements of a pillar that it is based on the chaotic waters associated with hell and topped by visions of paradise and the jewel on the lotus.





On this level stand out four great sculptures of the Four Heavenly Kings, each looking in one direction, which by its content, size and beauty of execution are the main part of the pillar. "The care with which all the details of the costume were treated, but above all the firmness of the attitudes and the austere dignity of the faces, make these four statues one of the masterpieces of Chinese sculpture from the Song period" (Finot and Goloubew 1925: 441).

Among the Heavenly Kings, engraved on the stone, are the texts of 38 charms or *dharanis* written in an ancient form of Sanskrit. The use of Sanskrit charms was widespread in Yunnan at the time, and since in the charms what is considered effective is the power of the words and sounds. They can lose their effectiveness when translated. This is the reason that until now, religious ceremonies which include *dharanis*, pronounce them in their original language.

Heavenly kings are worshipped as the protecting deities of Chinese temples. They played an important role in some events of Buddha's life, being present at the time of his final nirvana. Sometimes they appear in Buddhist mythology "*ruling the legions of supernatural beings who guard the slopes of Paradise (Mount Meru)*" (Williams 1976: 195). The large size of the Heavenly Kings, the only military element in the pillar, which far exceed that of the other deities, may be due to the fact that the pillar was built for a general, suggesting that in his defense of the Dali Buddhist kingdom against the threats arising in the four cardinal points, he could be identified with a Heavenly King. A general's identification with a Buddhist deity fits perfectly into the struggle for power between the Gao and the Duan families and with the local conceptions of a Buddhist savior. In the context of a grave, the Heavenly Kings were sometimes used as funerary sculptures. The fact that they wear a decorative armor rather than campaign armor, could indicate their status as guardians of the court and, therefore, the importance and high rank of the person in whose grave they are laid.



Each of the Heavenly Kings is a different deity well known to all readers interested in Chinese art, as they are at the door of Buddhist temples and are part of other religious compositions. Their images here, with a height of 1.5 meters, carefully carved against the main pillar, show that great attention was paid to each detail of their bodies and clothing, as well as to the overall composition. They protect each of the four cardinal points from the enemies of Buddhism. They are warrior kings represented with rich armor, as well as with objects and symbols of military strength.

While they are usually located on both sides of the entrance to Buddhist temples in China, in the stupas of India their images used to be placed facing the four directions, protecting the universe which extended from this axis. Here they protect the *dharaṇi*, Buddha's sacred words, as well as the symbolic world built around the pillar.

The Heavenly kings are:

Vaiṣṇavana is the king of the North. In the left hand he usually carries a halberd, here replaced by a trident and in the right hand a stupa. His hair is arranged in parallel curls on his forehead, and above it, he wears a crown of the five Buddhas, of which only three can be seen, adorned with floating ribbons on the back. He wears warrior armor, a tiger belt brooch, and ceremonial clothes. He is wearing sandals.

Dhṛtarāstra is the king of the East. He is the king of heavenly musicians and he usually carries a lute. Here he has an arrow pointing downwards, so the absence of the lute is compensated by his pleasing countenance and curious headdress. His hairstyle is joined with a kind of cap that extends to his sides giving him a friendly and comical air. His face, with its semi-closed eyes, maintains a sweet expression, as is his armor, with lotus flowers.

Virūdhaka is the king of the South. He usually carries a sword. Here he holds a mallet with both hands, whose pommel is formed by the union of a *makara* head (a sea monster of Hindu mythology) and a garuda head crowned by a lotus bud. His broad eyebrows, beard, mustache, and sideburns contribute to give him at the same time a serene and ferocious air. He wears a high tiara in the shape of a hat, with gold and precious stones. His earrings are lotus flowers.



Virûpâksa is the king of the West. He usually carries a stupa and a snake. Here he is shown with two large, round eyes and an open mouth. He's wearing a tiara with ribbons on his back. His sword held down by his right hand crosses his chest in a diagonal line. Its edge is held by the left hand. His appearance is that of a terrible protector that contrasts with the other three kings. He wears an elevated headdress, military clothes, and a tiger brooch.

The iconography of the Heavenly Kings is quite unusual on this pillar. They do not carry the usual attributes seen in later temples, but objects which point out to a different Buddhist iconography, or to an iconographic model still developing, as similar attributes have been found in the Longmen Caves of Luoyang and in the Dunhuang caves, the largest complex of Buddhist art.

Three of the Heavenly Kings are depicted stepping on three *yaksas* or demons, also worked with great precision, which present some differences. The eastern one is threatened by a snake, the southern and western one have a third eye. The faces of the devils manifest their pain, they are defeated and their mouths are open, perhaps whining. Their heads are resting on their right hands while their left hands, placed on the ground, seems to show that they are exerting force to free themselves from the pressure of the Heavenly Kings.

The guardian of the north is held by a group of three figures, which are the Mother Earth and two *yaksas* at her sides. The three come out of the middle of a cloud, because in Buddhist mythology it is said that this king is carried through the air by a goddess with a human form. It can be seen that while the other kings wear boots, according to their military appearance, he wears sandals because he does not need to walk.

**VAIṢRAVANA
HEAVENLY KING
OF THE NORTH**

**Crown of
the five
Dhyani Buddhas**

**Jewel that
grants wishes**

**Trident:
Represents
the Three Jewels of
the Buddhism:
Buddha, the Law
and the Community**

**Tiger Buckle:
Symbol of power
and royalty**

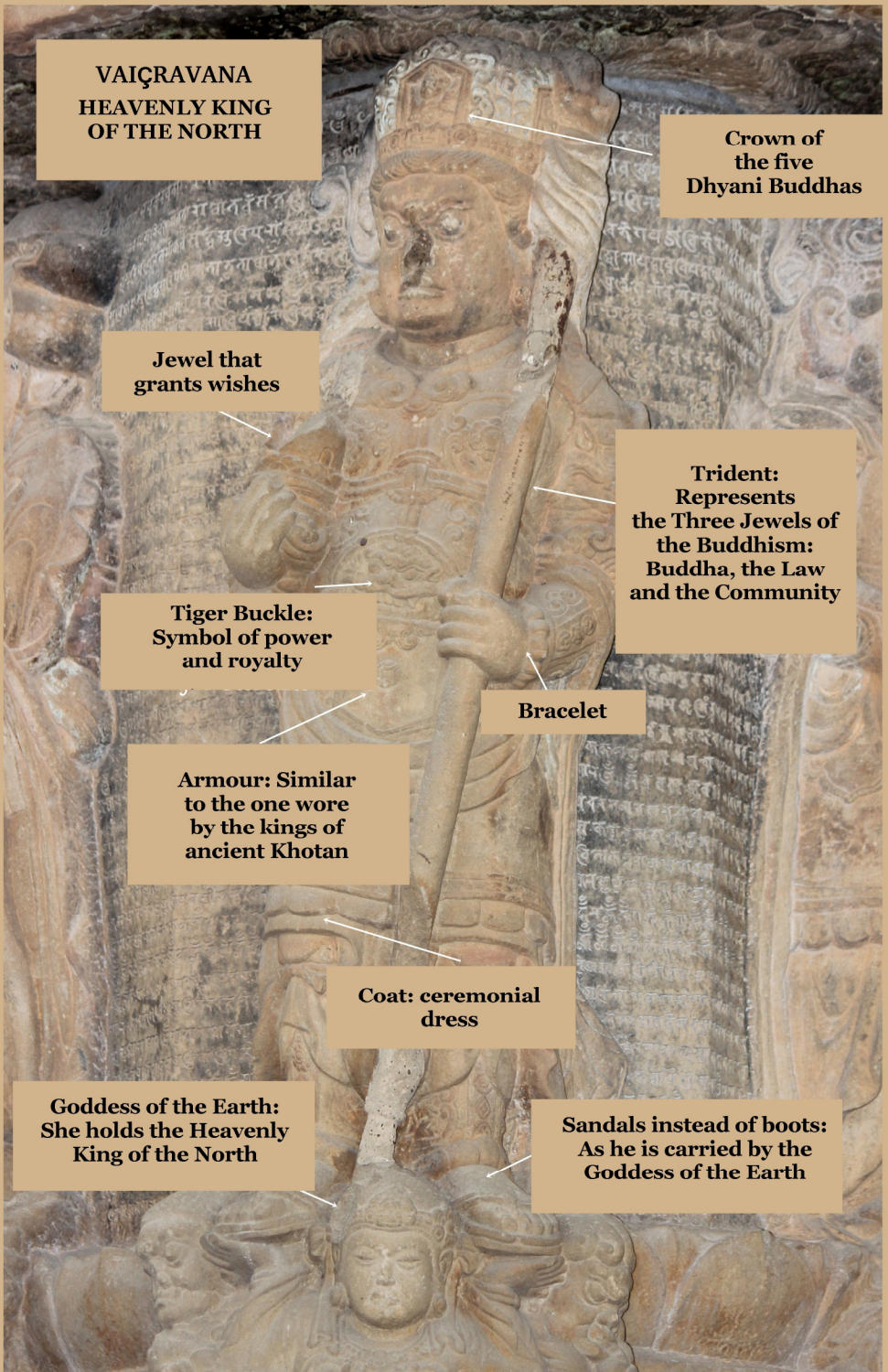
Bracelet

**Armour: Similar
to the one wore
by the kings of
ancient Khotan**

**Coat: ceremonial
dress**

**Goddess of the Earth:
She holds the Heavenly
King of the North**

**Sandals instead of boots:
As he is carried by the
Goddess of the Earth**



THE GODDESS OF THE EARTH

The presence of the Goddess of the Earth in this composition seems to be an Indian idea. because in Hindu art all deities related to the earth are feminine. This goddess is praised as the patroness of moral righteousness and truthfulness, and as a powerful guardian who casts out demons, grants protection from evil deeds, and expresses victory over enemies and rivals.

In Buddhism, the Goddess of the Earth is present alongside Buddha Sakyamuni, witnessing his victory over the temptations of the demon Mara. This scene is evoked with the gesture (*mudra*) of the Buddha's right hand touching the ground to summon her as a witness of his enlightenment. In response, the upper part of the goddess' body emerges from the earth and she expresses reverence with united palms.

On the other hand, it seems to be a tradition in Central Asian countries (as in ancient Hotan) that rulers were portrayed with a female figure holding them. From there it could have passed to China, as in older Chinese traditions this Heavenly King is found with his feet on the Goddess of Heaven and Earth (Ditiannu 地天女), which is flanked by two dwarfs, Nilanpo and Pilanpo (Yeoung 2003).





Western visitors are usually surprised by the presence of fierce figures of martial appearance and attitude in these religious monuments. In the iconography of East Asian Buddhist art, the Heavenly Kings are always presented as warriors in armor, sometimes with a helmet, weapons, a martial attitude and a threatening posture. In their older Buddhist representations, in India, the Heavenly Kings did not have military attributes but were represented with civilian attire, dressed as the Hindu kings of the time. The old Vedic texts stress that the king's duty, dressed in military or civilian clothes, is to protect his people, and it is clear that in the religious environment this is not a question of material defence, because the real enemy of human beings is not outside, but in their own minds.

The iconography of the armed Heavenly Kings dates back to Central Asia in the early 4th century when the figure of the king Vaiçravana was associated with the images of the Kushan kings. His long armored frontal image, holding a spear and a stupa, resembles the portraits of these kings in their coins. The armour of the heavenly kings is a type which originated in Hotan, transmitted to other places of the Silk Road (it is seen in the paintings of the caves of Kizil) and later to the China of the Tang dynasty.

Symbolic aspects of the weapons of the Heavenly Kings

In the tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, the armour and weapons of the Heavenly Kings are metaphors for the virtues that Buddhism values. Here are some simple clues about their symbolism. We have followed Yeoung's magnificent work (2003).

Cross-belt. The cross-belt was an attribute of the ideal king Rama in India, acting as a symbol of divinity rather than something functional.

Arch and arrow. Symbols of an ideal royalty. The force of the bow and arrow symbolizes the power of meditation because with them the Yogi strikes the supreme objective, that is, the object of contemplation. The Indian rulers of the Kushan dynasty were later symbolized as archers, as a bow and arrow were powerful enough to represent their royalty.

Skirt. Regardless of the type of armor, Heavenly Kings usually wear a skirt underneath, indicating that they are dressed for ceremonial occasions and not for battles.

Sword. As a Buddhist object, it symbolizes enlightenment and spiritual wisdom. As an offensive weapon, it is a symbol of destruction. The sword is given to the king, whose duty is to destroy the forces of evil in the world. In ancient China, they were a hierarchical symbol of success and in Buddhism, the wisdom that eliminates the illusion caused by ignorance is symbolized as a sword.

Lance. It is a penetrating weapon, used to subdue or destroy enemies of religion, often carried by angry deities.

Vajra. Vajra is a ray, an instrument used to destroy the enemies of religion, which represents indestructibility, or the wisdom that destroys passion. Vajra also means "diamond" in Sanskrit texts.

Cintamani. It is a jewel or precious stone that has the power to grant its holder all wishes. The jewels also symbolize that the teachings of Buddha are precious, the perfection of the Law.

Level 3. Vajrapanis and the Dhyani-Buddhas.

The third level consists of a new octagonal platform that divides and supports a purely religious scene, and a series of sculptures on it and in the body of the pillar.

This level is framed below and above by a band of miniature sitting Buddhas contained in two cornices about 30 cm high. Within each of the eight bands, there are six Buddhas divided into two groups of three, a number that points again to the World Womb Mandala. In each of the eight corners, there is a lotus flower closed in what appears to be a Buddhist jewel. A closed lotus represents the time before a person finds Buddha or enlightenment.

This level is also protected by a series of deities. Nothing can surprise the uninitiated in the mysteries of Buddhism more than hearing that these bodily deformed deities, turbulent and furious in appearance, with the arm raised in a threatening gesture, share the same task as the serene Heavenly Kings. They are called Vajrapanis, and are some of the most complex deities of Buddhist iconography. In some sacred texts, they are considered a kind of bodhisattva. Generally associated with power (as other bodhisattvas are with compassion or wisdom) they soon assumed a protective role taking the form of *Yaksa* demons. That is why other legends say that in their origin they were *Yaksa* demons, who were subdued by the Buddha and remained at his service as personal protectors. Its name means carriers of *vajra* (rays), although they do not always carry it, as in this case. Their rays symbolize the analytical knowledge that disintegrates awareness. They have an angry expression to generate fear in the individual to loosen his dogmatism.

These protectors, covered by a robe that envelops their bodies like a whirlwind, with bare feet, their mouths open in a scream and their hands raised threateningly, are related to two deities often found at the

gates of Chinese temples, known as the protectors (sometimes kings) Heng (or Hum) and Ha (or Ah). Their name makes reference to the process of breathing, exhalation and inhalation, symbolizing bipartition and polarity (Bonefoy 1993: 134).

On this pillar, as well as at the gates of some temples and in some old Dunhuang paintings from the 10th century, two Vajrapani pairs show symmetrical configurations. To understand their hidden meaning, we must first turn to their symbolism in temples. One of them, usually placed on the left, called Secret Traces, raises his right arm and lowers his left arm; the other, usually on the right, called Great-God, does the opposite, *“but in both, the hand on the raised arm is open and the hand on the lowered arm is closed into a fist [...] they] are often though not always shown with an additional formal feature that underscores their bipolarity, open mouth/closed mouth [...] This feature has been interpreted as symbolic of the two monosyllabic mantras. A (open mouth) and Hum (closed mouth)”* (Bonefoy 1993: 134).

These two characteristics can also refer to the esoteric meanings of the Vajrapani, since it is said that they (perhaps Secret Traces) are the principal recipients, holders and protectors of all texts, literature and teachings received from the Buddha, as well as protectors of those who recite them. Other esoteric texts attribute to the Vajrapani the creation of the supreme Dhyani-Buddhas, and in the oldest treatise that speaks about the origin of these deities, it is said that they arose from the emission of a certain sound. The presence of these four images of Vajrapani in the exterior, oversized, and in the interior the sculptures of the four Dhyani-Buddhas could refer here to that "secret teaching". In concrete that the Vajrapanis created with their sounds the four Dhyani-Buddhas. In the table of Dhyani-Buddhas we can see the sound traditionally attributed with the creation of each deity.



The existence of ancient images of Vajrapanis in which the posture of their arms, also raised above the head, rather than a threat suggests that they are dancing, could be linked to the creative power of the word and gestures present in ancient Buddhism (Bhattacharyya 1958:467). A final characteristic of the Vajrapanis is especially relevant in the composition of this pillar, because in some texts, it is said that, following the orders of Vairocana, they suppressed all the worldly divinities, to take them to the top of Mount Sumeru, where they will seek refuge in the three jewels of Buddhism (the Buddha, his law or dharma and the community or sangha) (Buswell and Lopez 2014).

These Vajrapānis guard the space in which four Buddhas have been carved. They are the Dhyanī or contemplative Buddhas. Each of the four Buddhas, located in a niche about 70 cm high and 1.4 meters wide, is slightly turned with respect to the cardinal points. They can also be recognized because they are represented by their characteristic hand gestures (*mudras*). Each of them, seated on a throne with a foliated background, occupies one of the intervals, with an entourage of eight assistants, devotees or bodhisattvas.

The Buddhas present at this level are the most important in Buddhism. They are the key to the Buddhist iconography on which the entire pantheon is built. The oldest text that speaks of their creation, dating back to approximately the 3rd century BC, tells us that each one of them emerged from a sound. This shows that the most important thing is the sound, perhaps of the *dharaṇī* or the sound coming out from the Vajrapani's mouths. Most popular traditions contain detailed descriptions of the life and vows by which human beings (generally monks) succeeded in their path to reach Buddhahood.

ICONOGRAPHY OF A VAJRAPANI

**Fierce face.
He's a Yaksha
demon**

**Open mouth:
Shouting and in the
process of creation**

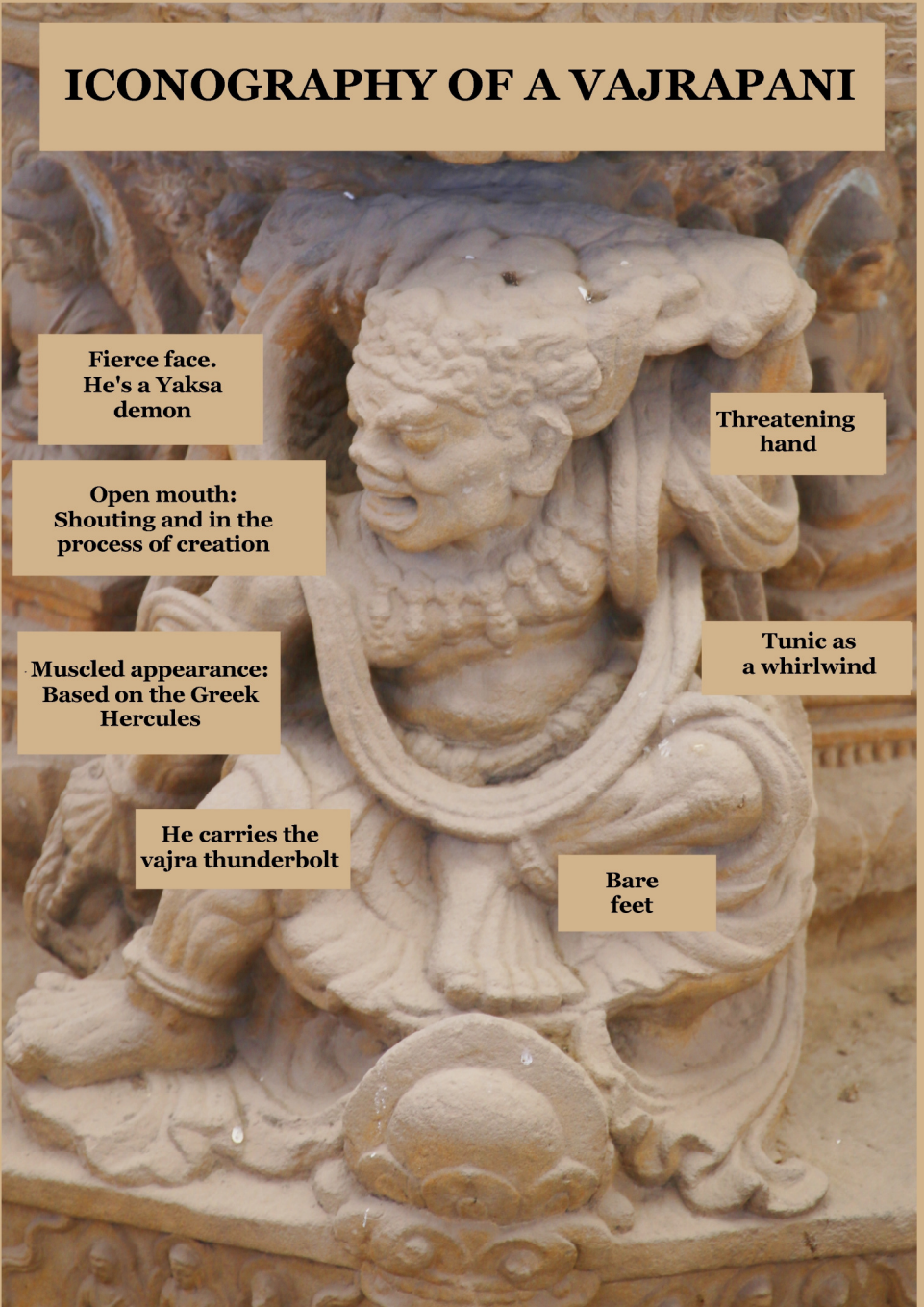
**Muscled appearance:
Based on the Greek
Hercules**

**He carries the
vajra thunderbolt**

**Threatening
hand**

**Tunic as
a whirlwind**

**Bare
feet**



If the Dhyani-Buddhas arise from the magic mantras of the lower level, knowing that the bodhisattvas present in the next levels are considered emanations of the Dhyani-Buddhas, and that these bodhisattvas are the Buddhist deities which carry on the burden of interaction with human beings, then this pillar could symbolize the process of creation according to Buddhist mythology. It would show in the first level the undifferentiated ocean, in the second, the sound or creative mantra, in the third, the contemplative Dhyani Buddhas, in the fourth and fifth, their emanations, the holy bodhisattvas, which will interact with people, helping them to reach paradise, which is represented in the sixth level.

According to the Buddhist religion, each Buddha has three different natures. One is his mortal nature, with which he lived on earth from his birth in this world until he was liberated with death. During that stage, they are known as Manushi-Buddha. The second is the abstract nature of the Buddha's complete purity after reaching Nirvana. This is called Dhyani-Buddha. The third is the reflection in the sky of the Dhyani Buddha.

The Dhyani Buddhas are at the center of Buddhist symbolism. They represented the five primordial cosmic forces that are responsible for creation. They have been identified in some Buddhist philosophies with the five elements of which the universe is composed. It is said that each one corresponds to one of the five directions, is related to one of the five senses, each mounts a different animal, each is represented in the paintings with one of the five colors, each one was created by a sound.

In some places their spiritual children are even called bodhisattvas and carry the same color and symbol of recognition. They also can be identified by the *mudra* they made and their sacred object.

In stupas and other symbols of the Buddhist Universe they are generally represented on the four sides, facing the four cardinal points. Vairocana is the deity of the inner shrine and is, therefore, generally unrepresented, but since the whole pillar is his space, believers also consider him to be present. Being inside and manifesting in so many different ways, Vairocana is one of the favorite deities of esoteric

Buddhism. Sometimes he is considered the creator of everything that exists, because everything comes from within. Some schools even consider the other four Buddhas to be emanations of Vairocana. Together they all symbolize both the creation of the world and that of a Buddhist universe. The other four Dhyani Buddhas are: Amoghasiddha facing north; Ratnasambhava facing south; Akshobhya facing east; and Amitabha facing west.

THE DHYANI BUDDHAS AND THEIR MAIN ATTRIBUTES





In Buddhist iconographic traditions each element of the images and sculptures is dotted with a symbolism that reflects religious ideals. In the process of artistic creation, the artist is fully conscious of the multiple layers of meaning that his work will convey, from the purely aesthetic one to the metaphorical ideal, to the fact that believers will see in his work a guide to enhance their understanding of enlightenment and a material help to internalizing the meaning of the Buddha.

The four Dhyani-Buddhas each have a circular halo that, like that of the Christian tradition, indicates enlightenment. As enlightenment is a spiritual event that cannot be described, the artists show it in the images of Buddha with a light or a halo that surrounds his head. Each Buddha has also a second lanceted halo, a representation of the leaf of the Bodhi tree, under which Sakyamuni reached enlightenment. It is a new sign that doubles the idea that the described characters are Buddhist saints.

They are always represented as seated on a full blown lotus. They are seated because seeking enlightenment through meditation is a basic concept of Buddhist tradition. They are in the meditative lotus pose with legs crossed, and the soles of both feet turned upwards. *“The hand that rests on the lap is sometimes empty, but in most cases holds the bowl. The head is bare, the thick clustering curls radiate effulgence like a flame of fire. The eyes are half-closed in meditation, showing the mind completely drawn inwards in perfect introspection. The dress consists of an undergarment reaching from the chest to the knee, and secured by a scarf. The body is loosely covered by the habit of a monk, leaving only the right arm bare”* (Bhattacharyya 1958: 48), a symbol of their *“commitment to realize enlightenment through forgoing worldly gratification”* (Richie 2014:41).

This contemplative posture is an ancient yogic position, symbolic of the perfectly trained body. The Buddha seated meditating acts as a guide for believers, his legs crossed and his eyes half-closed show the way a Buddhist must follow.

SYMBOLISM OF A DHYANI BUDDHA

Ushnisha or
hair crown
transcendence

Halo of bodhi
tree leaf

Bare shoulder:
He is an ascetic

Half-closed eyes:
He is meditating

Halo of
holiness

Indian
robe

Vitarka mudra
He bestows Buddhist
doctrines

Dhyana mudra
meditation

Seated on a
lotus pedestal

Legs crossed
in meditation



AKSHOBHYA



He is the Buddha looking east. He resides in the Eastern Paradise. Originally he was a monk who gave strong vows to practice and teach Dharma in the Eastern Land and not feel any anger or malice towards any sentient being until enlightenment. Therefore his name, “the unperturbed.” His right hand touches the earth, putting it as witness of the fate that he reached Nirvana.

Called “the immovable”, is symbolized as a mirror. because a mirror attaches to no reflection and repels none, but always stands imperturbable and immutable. His teaching is also compared with a mirror, for he knows what is real, and what is illusion, its reflection.

RATNASAMBHAVA



His name meaning "born from a jewel" makes him protector of the family of jewels. Its position in the southern quadrant of the mandala is associated with fertility and productivity, including all the highest achievements of human culture. He represents the wisdom of equality, which in the material plane is symbolized as sharing as opposed to giving. Sharing makes the ego disappear, and in the spiritual plane sees that everything has the same nature: Emptiness. His left hand, lying on his lap, holds the *cintamani* jewel, and his right hand is on the *varada mudra* that bestows Buddhist truths, the supreme giving.

AMITHABA



He is the Buddha looking west. His two hands are placed on the lap in the *dhyana mudra* of meditation and hold a begging bowl filled with nectar. His name means "Limitless light", because after death all the bodhisattvas that reached illumination, are going to the Pure Land of Amitabha. He is the embodiment of compassion and the most popular of the Dhyani-Buddhas; his name became a sacred greeting among Buddhist, as he is believed to open the path to salvation to the common people.

When he is worshipped as a grantor of longevity he is called Amitayus (Long Life Dispenser).

AMOGHASIDDHI



Amoghasiddhi is the Buddha looking north. His name literally means infallible (*amogha*) success (*siddhi*). He is the Buddha of all accomplishing wisdom, and represents the practical realization of the Buddhist activities. Being completely successful he has the power of infallible magic. His symbol is the *vishvavajra*, or double *vajra*. It is made of two crossed *vajras* and symbolizes the highest comprehension of truth and the spiritual power of a Buddha. His right hand rises in *abhaya mudra* (blessing of fearlessness) indicating protection.

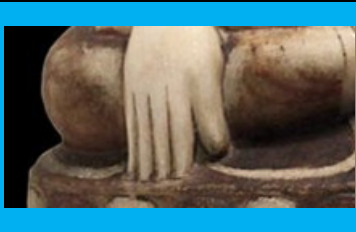
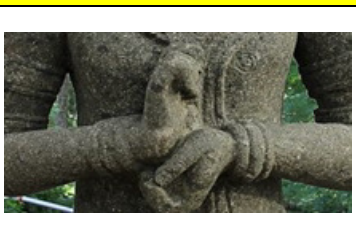
THE MUDRAS

A *mudra* is a sacred gesture usually made with the hands. *Mudra* literally means "gesture"; a physical, mental and psychic attitude that expresses and channels cosmic energy within the mind and body. In many religious traditions hands are considered sacred, a perfect microcosm of the universe, that can open communication with the brain giving access to the subtle (spiritual) body and with the spiritual world beyond men. This made *mudras* not only a means of personal expression or self-empowerment (as used in yogic practices), but also a mean of communicating with the deities, reached often in meditation. *Mudras* can also serve to focus the mind and direct its power of attention.

As a representation of the universe, *mudras* were associated in China and India with the five elements: Thumb= fire, index finger = air, middle finger = ether, ring finger = earth, and the pinky = water, giving rise to complex philosophical theories that made the harmony between the fingers, expressed in different gestures, a reflect in the bodily of the universal harmony.

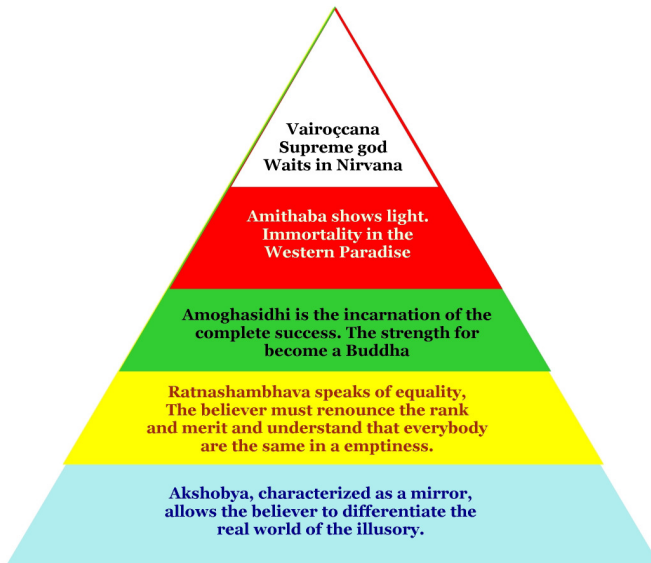
The use of *mudras* contextualizes the Buddhist teachings. In his symbolic language, the devotee could read not only the special powers and attributes of God but also the particular ecstatic state of mind that personified each deity. Thanks to the power of the *mudras*, the devotee can identify himself with the deity. As *mudras* are used to favor spiritual development, each *mudra* is give a specific meaning and action, as they not only symbolize a certain state of consciousness, but can also provoke it. In this way, they are an element of communication between gods and people.

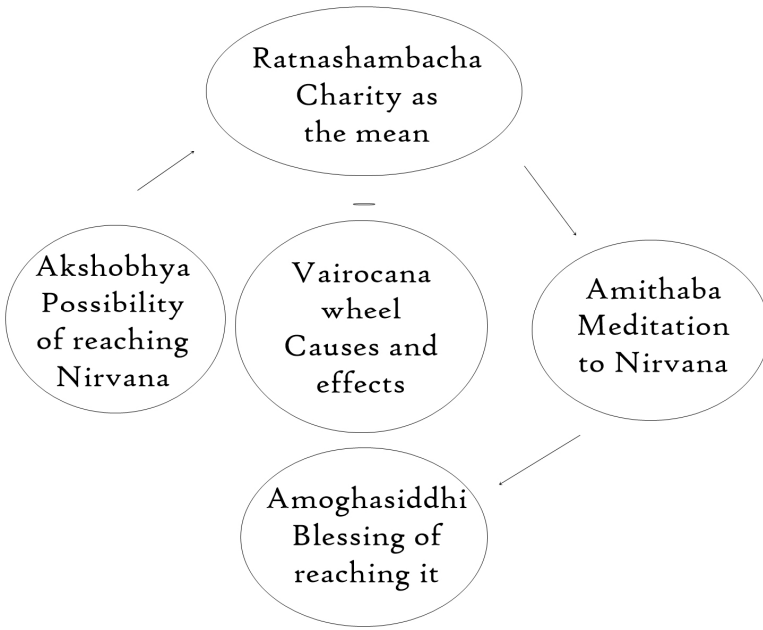
Since the images of the gods have been created by Buddhist artists, *mudras* are a mean of transmitting messages between these artists and the worshippers who will contemplate their work. There are exoteric *mudras*, the simplest, found in most images, and esoteric ones, known only to some initiates. *Mudras* also presuppose a teaching and the believer uses them to identify himself with the spiritual states symbolized by the deities. While there are variations in *mudras*, six basic types dominate in the images of Buddha.

Dhyana-mudra. Mudra of meditation. It represents concentration in meditation, with hands resting on the lap. It symbolizes the natural relationship between emptiness and form. It instructs in the posture to adopt during meditation.	
Bhumisparsha-mudra. Mudra that puts the earth as a witness. When Sakyamuni reached Nirvana, he beckoned to the land as a witness. This mudra shows that just as the Buddha reached Nirvana, so Nirvana is within everyone's reach.	
Abhaya-mudra Mudra of protection. The right hand with the palm towards the believer and the fingers towards the sky. It is used to dispel fear, and provide tranquility and serenity.	
Varada-mudra. Mudra of the bestowal, with both hands down and palms towards the believers. It symbolizes charity and compassion. The Buddha bestows the capacity of Buddhist understanding. The most precious of gifts.	
Dharmachakra-mudra. Mudra of the wheel. It shows the Buddha turning the Dharma wheel. It symbolizes the beginning of the transmission of the Buddhist teachings and the most important: the relationship between cause and effect.	

On the Kunming pillar it is possible that the four Dhyani-Buddhas symbolize an spiritual ascension, that they marked a path to enlightenment showing models or instructions to the believer. Akshobhya, characterized, as a mirror, allows the believer to differentiate the real and the illusory world. His vows are the potentiality. Ratnasambhava speaks about equality. The believer must give up rank and merit and understand that everybody is equal in the void. Amoghasiddhi is the embodiment of complete success, the strength to become a Buddha. Amithaba shows the light, immortality in the Western Paradise.

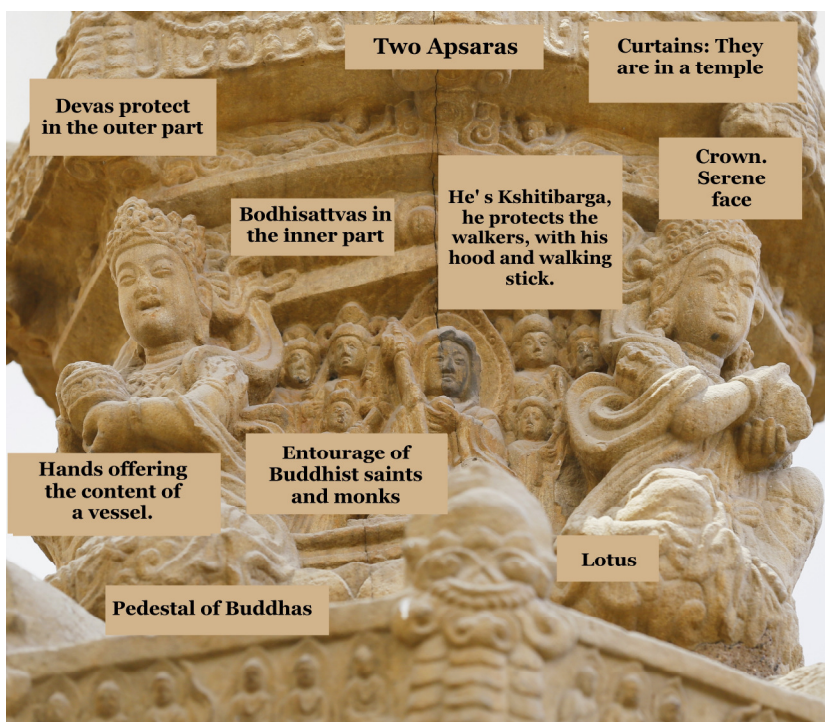
THE ROAD TO NIRVANA ACCORDING TO THE DHARANI PILLAR





Their *mudras* could also show a path. In the center is Vairocana, who is usually depicted with the *mudra* of the wheel. He embodies the continuous intertwining of causes and effects, reflected throughout the pillar, which as Howard notes, in its central point of view could be compared to an eight-spoke Buddhist wheel. Arriving from the east, Akshobhya shows that the earth is a witness to the possibility of reaching Nirvana, then Ratnasambhava says that charity is the key to reaching it. Charity must be accompanied by meditation (which Amithaba shows). The result is the blessing that Amoghasiddhi points out.

Level 4. Bodhisattvas I



In levels 4 and 5, the iconographic motifs of level 3 are repeated. In each of these two levels, four figures stand out facing the four cardinal points, and between them, there are niches with the different Buddhist saints. On this occasion the protectors are four devas or angelic bodhisattvas showed amid stylized clouds, half kneeling, carrying in their hands different offerings. Each of them wears an elaborate

headdress and has a beatific expression on his face. They hold their offerings between the two hands, that is, they hold them in one hand and put the other on top of it, as in the gesture of distributing their contents. Their offerings seem to refer to the Buddhism spiritual richness: a shell, a bowl, incense, jewels, etc. These offerings have a religious meaning, and at the same time serve to protect the bodhisattvas carved between the devas.

There are altogether four deva protectors and four bodhisattvas, each accompanied by a group of six assistants and monks. While the classification of Buddhist deities is already complex for a layman, the concept of bodhisattva makes it even more so! A bodhisattva is a human being who has attained enlightenment, but who postpones Nirvana in order to help others to attain it. He is a Buddhist practitioner who delays the moment of attaining complete enlightenment as a perfect Buddha for the benefit of all other beings in the universe. There are therefore a myriad of bodhisattvas, but as religion has to give meaning to the spiritual feelings of ordinary people, who do not want to get confused by theological disquisitions, based on their spiritual achievements, the bodhisattvas are divided into two groups: ordinary bodhisattvas, men and women who reached an enlightening thought, and the celestial ones, to which the title of bodhisattva refers. These last, like the saints of Western religions, being near the everyday practice of Buddhist believers, are models of behavior, helpers in the attainment of sanctity and also powerful entities to whom the believers pray for help before mundane difficulties. In Buddhist meditation each bodhisattva opens to the believer a path already tested, a model to follow in the effort to reach enlightenment.

Having four bodhisattvas in the 4th level and four more in the 5th, this pillar has altogether eight bodhisattvas. Just the same number usually present in the World Womb Mandalas. In both cases, there are eight bodhisattvas surround the central figure of Vairocana..

Bodhisattvas are sometimes depicted in groups. One of the most popular is the so-called Eight Bodhisattvas, a group of deities who have a certain iconographic identity in Buddhism.



Associated with them is a series of symbols and territories that would help the believer in his ascension during his spiritual journey. Textual evidence for the grouping can be found as early as the 3rd century, as lists of eight great bodhisattvas occur in the early texts of Mahayana, where they are described as protectors of the faithful and providers of worldly blessings. They are linked to another group of eight Buddhas.

Groups of eight bodhisattvas gathered around a seated Buddha are among the earliest and most widespread examples of mandala imagery. The mandala paintings of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas sometimes show them arranged in two groups of four on each side of the central Buddha, and others surrounding the central Buddha. These circular arrangements, which provide prototypes for the internal sections of other mandalas, are the most influential in later Buddhist art.

Bodhisattvas symbolize the eight directions as well as the eight internal forms of consciousness in Buddhist thinking and are associated with the four Dhyani-Buddhas. The directions and associated types consciousness of the Eight Bodhisattvas are as follows:

Bodhisattva	Direction	Conscience	Object	Quality
Kshitigarbha	E	visual	jewel	richness
Maitreya	SE	hearing	naga	love
Samantabhadra	NW	smelling	sun	offerings
Akasagarbha	S	taste	ether	purification
Avalokitesvara	W	bodily	white lotus	compassion
Manjusri	NE	intellectual	Blue uptala flower	wisdom
Sarva Nivarana viskambhin	SW	universal	moon	purity
Vajrapari	N	illumination	vajra	power



Kshitigarbha: east, visual consciousness of the illusory nature of the material world; Maitreya: southeast, auditory consciousness of immutable Dharma; Samantabhadra: northwest, smell consciousness; Akasagarbha: south, sense of taste; Avalokitesvara: west, body consciousness; Manjusri: northeast, thought consciousness; Nirvanaviskambhin: southwest, universe consciousness; and Vajrapari: north, enlightenment consciousness.

Sometimes each of them carries a flower with an attribute placed on top or has the identification attribute in hand (Livingston 2001), which in the famous list of the monk Mipham (1846-1912), are the following: Manjushri holds a blue utpala flower [like that of Green Tara]"; Vajrapani, a vajra; Avalokiteshvara, a white lotus, Maitreya, a naga

tree, Kshitigarbha, a jewel, SarvaNivarana-vishvakhvakambin, the moon, Akashagarbha -ether; Samantabhadra, the sun

Although the eight bodhisattvas all possess the same qualities and powers, each shows perfection in a particular area or activity. Thus Manjusri embodies wisdom; Avalokitesvara, compassion; Vajrapani represents power; Kshitigarbha increases the wealth and fertility of the earth; Sarvanivaranavishkambhin purifies evil deeds and obstructions; Maitreya incarnates love; Samantabhadra shows special expertise in making offerings and prayers of aspiration; and Akashagarbha has the perfect ability to purify transgressions (Eight great Bodhisattvas p. 604)

And according to Khenpo Chöga. among the immeasurable qualities of the Buddha, eight of them are manifested as the eight bodhisattvas: the embodiment of wisdom in Manjusri, compassion in Avalokitesvara; the embodiment of power in Vajrapani; the embodiment of Buddha's activity in Maitreya; the embodiment of Buddha's merit in Kshitigarbha; the Buddha's qualities in Sarvanivaranavishkambhin; the Buddha's blessings in Akashagarbha; and the Buddha's aspirations in Samantabhadra.

We will now identify the bodhisattvas present at the 4th level.

Avalokitesvara



Avalokitesvara is the most popular of all gods in northern Buddhism. He is sometimes considered the spiritual reflection or son of Amitabha, and a personification of compassion. He watches over all beings and heeds their cries of suffering and distress. He responds directly to the pleas of those in great need. Avalokitesvara worship was introduced in China towards the end of the 1st century CE. In China, he is called Guanyin. Its name, in Hindu “the lord of what is perceived” was translated in Chinese as Guanyin (perceives the sounds). His compassionate activity is sometimes multiplied in images that show him with a great number of heads (usually 11 to listen to the sufferer) and hands (4, 11 or thousand to emphasize his wish to help).

Avalokitesvara occupies a very special place in Yunnan. He was the main religious figure venerated in the kingdoms of Nanzhao and Dali. During those centuries, there were continuous references to him. For example, the monk associated with the beginning of the Kingdom of Nanzhao was considered to be a manifestation of Avalokitesvara. He is the most common figure in Yunnan works of art, and numerous images have been discovered in various iconographic representations. His cult, incarnated as the goddess Guanyin, is still the most important among the Bai nationality. In some cases, he is considered to be the first ancestor of many lineages, and it was frequent in the kingdom of Dali to insert "Guanyin" between the first and last name of a person (Bryson 2016a: 88).

Sarva-nivarana viskambhin

Sarva-nivarana viskambhin with four arms is shown holding in the back hands a cintamani and a lotus while the two hands at his chest level are in a fist gesture. His name means complete (*sarva*) remover (*viskambhin*) of obscurations (*nivarana*), for he blots out all the sins of devotees, purifies evil deeds, completely cleansing away all obscurations. He never abandons those who invoke him for the sake of evil. He is invoked to overcome all obstacles that may hinder good meditation.

Kshitigarbha



Dizang, in Sanskrit Kshitigarbha, is widely venerated in China. He owes this popularity to his benevolent activity, which is unceasingly carried out in the interests of men, especially the damned who suffer the torments of hell. He is a kind of moderator of the infernal judges, for although he is in the hell, he does not judge souls, but opens a way for reform and forgiveness of sins. He seeks to save mankind from the punishments inflicted by the ten Kings of Hell, for he has made a vow to

save all creatures from hell. Its two attributes are the *sistre* (a kind of stick) used to shake the gates of hell, and the miraculous gem (*cintamani*); used to carry light into the dark realm. Sometimes he carries in his hand by an alms bowl (*pátrá*), which shows that he is a monk.

Among his contributions to human well-being, he is credited with liberating the condemned, guiding souls to paradise, healing diseases, facilitating childbirth, fertilizing the earth and protecting crops from parasites and houses from fire, etc. He is god of roads and patron protector of travelers. Here, his head is covered with a cap, perhaps a "traveler's shawl", which identifies him as god of roads, and emphasizes the idea that this pillar is a path.

Akasagarbha

The bodhisattva Akasagarbha is represented with three heads and six arms. His name can be translated as "boundless space treasury," as his wisdom is said to be as boundless as space itself. He is regarded as the essence of ether, and he personifies infinitely vast wisdom and compassion. His main utensils, the sun and moon discs, which are visibly displayed on his two upper hands, allude to his link with space. The jewels in his crowns could be additional references to astral bodies, or they could also represent the jewelry he usually wears. His two lower hands seem to hold the Buddhist jewel.

The relationships between these bodhisattvas also could hide a message for believers, which would form part of the spiritual ascent through the mandala to the states of perfection and eventually nirvana. The actions of each bodhisattva complements and reinforces the actions of the others. Kshitigarbha acts as a guide, and in fact, is shown to be the god of the roads, Samantabhadra removes obstacles, Akasagarbha presides over the celestial vault and Avalokitesvara over the human world from the top of its hill. They show spatial orientation, the ability to transfer from the earth to the sky, and a path by which the believer is guided to avoid obstructions.



Level 5 - Bodhisattvas 2.

Level 5 presents a certain symmetry with level 4, as it shows, like the previous one, four statues of devas protecting and four bodhisattvas with a soft and elegant figure. The main difference between these protectors and those on the fourth level is that each one is surrounded by a mandorla, an oval or almond- shaped frame or aureole in which sacred personages are inserted, often used also in Christian iconography. Each deva has a different attribute. Their left hands, on their laps, show a certain symmetry between them; their right hand, always carrying elongated objects up to the height of the shoulders, emphasizes their differences.

One of the devas holds a *khakkhara* or monk's staff, the iron staff of the ordained Buddhist monks which is often held in the right hand of the disciples of Buddha. It is often paired with the bowl of alms of the left hand, as twin symbols of renunciation and meditation on emptiness. The objects held by other devas are not easily identifiable. Angela Howard thinks they are a sword, a lotus, and hands making the *dhyāna mudra*.

At the intervals between the devas, carved in the pillar, are found four Buddhas sitting on high thrones. Each is accompanied by six assistants, and two *apsaras* (spirits of the clouds and waters in Buddhist mythology, depicted dancing at the aquatic base of the works of art or at the top) floating on layers of undulating clouds above each of these groups.

The identification of these deities is made more difficult by their small size, the enormous deterioration of at least one of them and the reality that most bodhisattvas do not have a single canonical representation, varying their forms and attributes from one region to another and between different periods.



Moreover, the concept of the Eight Bodhisattvas is not a fixed and immutable one, either, but different authors have included different deities among them. For this reason, although one may think that these deities are probably Maitreya, Manjusri, Vajrapani and Samanthabhadra, one cannot reject the presence (as Howard suggests) of the Buddha of Medicine Bhaisajyaguru, since he is also part of the Eight Bodhisattvas in some lists. They could be identified then as Bhaisajyaguru, Maitreya, Manjusri, and Samanthabhadra.

Bhaisajyaguru is the Buddha of healing and medicine. In Buddhist belief, religion and medicine are closely related. Buddhist teachings are called the “king of medicines” for their ability to stop the sufferings of the believer. Reaching enlightenment was equated to the healing process. He is described as a physician who cures suffering by using medicine from his teachings. He is revered for his healing powers, both physical and spiritual, and usually holds a bottle of medicine in his left hand.

Maitreya is the Buddha of the future. He is said to be waiting in the Tusita paradise and will appear on earth when the world presided by Sakyamuni comes to an end. Maitreya (whose name means "loving



kindness" or "benevolence") evolved during the early centuries of our era, becoming one of the most popular figures of Buddhism throughout Asia. As the first bodhisattva to become a figure of worship, his cult set the standards for the development of later bodhisattvas..

Early iconography depicts him standing or sitting, holding a vase which symbolizes his impending birth in the Brahman caste, and with his hands in the *abhaya mudra*. It is said that he sits in a chair in a "thoughtful" position so that he can quickly descend to earth at the right time. In one of his most popular scriptures, he promised sentient beings the prospect of rebirth in the Tusita heaven along with him. It merged in China and Japan with a popular indigenous figure, Budai, a monk known for his fat belly. It is important to note that in some Tibetan *tankas* Maitreya carries an *amṛta kalasa* vase (Livingston 2001).

Manjusri represents the faculty of discrimination for knowledge and learning. As an embodiment of knowledge, his ritual is recited at the beginning of the day by monks and other students. He is generally represented as lifting in his right hand the sword of wisdom, which cuts through ignorance, and holding scriptures or the stem of a *utpala* flower in his left hand, sitting on a throne or on an elephant. The Sanskrit name Manjushri means "sweetly glorious". He is the patron of the Gelugpa school in Tibet.

Samantabhadra is one of the most popular bodhisattvas. His name literally means "Universal extending (*samanta*) Great Virtue (*bhadra*)" and is associated with the virtue and meditation. He is sometimes represented riding an elephant with six tusks, which represented the six senses or the six organs. Others say that they symbolize the Six Perfections: charity, morality, diligence, patience, contemplation, and wisdom. It is said that he can break his body into thousand of bodies and ride them in all directions, to protect sentient beings and to guide them to achieve enlightenment. His ten heads represent the ten vows he made. He was very popular both in Tibet and China where his images are frequently worshipped in a triad with Manjusri and Sakyamuni Buddha in the center.



Level 6- Amrta -kalasa: vessel of immortality

Level six is completely different from the previous levels. It is the end of the mandala narrative detected below. It consists of a *kalasa* vessel with a wide flared neck and a decorative band covered with jewelry around its belly, held by four phoenixes with their wings and tail upright. *Cintamani* jewels have been placed in the space between the phoenixes.



The *kalasa* vessels were used to store water in some Buddhist rituals, sacred water to be distributed or sprinkled among the devotees. There is also a special type of *kalasa* vessel, the *amṛta kalasa*, which was said to contain the nectar of immortality, made from parts belonging to each of the different gods (Kramish 1946:2-349). In one of the ancient Upanishads it is said: "The water of heaven flows from the head and destroys both suffering and pain." Experts think that the *amṛta kalasa* placed at the top (or head) of Buddhist monuments are the recipients that contain the waters of heaven, acting as spiritual protectors destroying suffering and pain (Boner 1966).

The presence of an *amṛta kalasa* at the top of sacred buildings such as stupas is documented in the earliest Buddhist temples. In traditional Buddhist architecture, it was already customary to end the stupas with an image of an *amṛta kalasa*, surely as an expression of the desire to provide immortality to the person to whom the stupa was dedicated. Everything seems to indicate that the vessel carved in the sixth level of the pillar is also an *amṛta kalasa*, and that its position at the apex of the elements related to the mandala, points to the salvation of souls, as well as to enlightenment and the realization of the ultimate truth. For the vessel contains the drink that makes one immortal, symbolizing that, reaching this point, the soul arrives at the place where the holy individual rises to the paradise. With the *amṛta kalasa* the world beyond death is reached.

In many Buddhist buildings, *"the foot of the kalasa stands in an exactly perpendicular line above the central-point [...] it marks the central axis of the temple and by implication, the axis of the universe"* (Boner 1966: XLI). In the Buddhist worldview the temple is not only the abode of Buddha, it represents also his body. The temple is the abode of the god because the temple is the god. The central axis of the temple can thus be associated to the spinal column, the central axis of human beings; as both are channels where the sacred energy flows.

Bearing in mind the concept of the temple as the body of god, the *amṛta kalasa* became a subtle element, flowing from the top of the skull during the highest state of meditation (Smith 1994). Applying these

ideas to the Dharani Pillar of Kunming and the iconographic compositions already described, the *amṛta kalasa* vessel could point to Vairocana's skull, from where the sacred nectar will overflow to destroy the suffering and pain of the continuous births, leading the deceased to paradise..

The presence of four phoenixes at the highest part of the pillar, which corresponds to the end of the stupa, is a common motif among the Buddhist monuments of Yunnan. Many have two or four birds at the top of many pagodas, among them the Pagodas of the East Temple and the West Temple in the Kunming. The phoenix, like the garuda birds of Hindu tradition, are usually considered protective deities specialized in the safety against calamities involving water, which are produced by dragons. They are part of an ancient mythology present in India and Southeast Asia that opposes naga water snakes and garuda birds. Here they would not only be protecting the multitude of Buddhas but in their opposition to the nagas. This gives shape to a complete symbolic universe with nagas at the bottom and garudas at the top, just 5 levels (including this one), as the Hindu tradition requires, developed in the pillar.

Garuda birds are also a symbol of kingship in Yunnan, as an old account of the establishment of the Nanzhao Kingdom says that a garuda flew down from a pillar's top and perched on the shoulder of the future king, as a signal of his future enthronement.

If we consider that this is the level at which the first part of this pillar is brought to an end, the simple iconography of the *amṛta kalasa* and the garudas complete the description of Mount Meru. Nagas are in the ocean, the Four Heavenly Kings at its gates, multitudes of deities dwelling on its slopes, garudas flying in its upper part and the heaven of the gods at its summit, from where they distribute the nectar of immortality. But the pillar represents, at the same time, a progression, the slow ascent of the soul through this mountain until reaching the immortality that its summits promise. A spiritual ascension in which the soul progresses from the lowest states of existence to the highest.

This ascension is shown graphically in the slight asymmetry in the arrangement of the protective figures and the niches in each of the

levels. It creates a sensation of ascending along a spiral, a feeling reinforced by a conical shape that makes it resemble the peak of a mountain.



Level 7 - *Harmika*: residence of gods or ancestors.

If we consider that the *amṛta kalasa* ends the singular structure associated with a mandala and Mount Meru, here must start a new concept, in which another series of iconographic elements are superimposed, crowning the pillar. Interestingly, this new level surges from the emanations that rise from the *amṛta kalasa* vessel, which form a crossed cloud that supports a two-story building topped with a *cintamani* jewel. The building consists of four pavilions that open to each of the cardinal points and occupy the entire surface of the pillar.



On the seventh level, the pavilions are elevated two steps above the pedestal, protected by a fence finished with three *cintamani* jewels, and covered with a Chinese-style round tile roof. Each pavilion has five figures and two assistants who, are only suggested as a shadow in the pillar. Each of the figures emerges on a throne of lotus flowers. Of those five figures, three are looking forward, and there is one at each of their sides (perhaps as protectors).

Some of the figures found in these pavilions seem to be masculine, other feminine. Their expressions are different, as well as their hand postures. But with the passage of time, it is difficult to identify them precisely. It seems that they represent the Buddhist deities who already enjoy nirvana. The shape of these pavilions is very similar to the *harmikas* of the stupas, so it will be possible that the buildings depicted in

this level were the residence of the gods or ancestors, with whom the believer will meet after reaching the nirvana.

This small level could be considered a graphic representation of the concepts developed in the previous ones. After reaching paradise, the deceased is seen in the residence of the gods.



Level 8 - The Great Buddhist Mother

On level 8, the figures are located on what seems to be the second floor of the pavillion. Curiously, here the same image is repeated in all four directions, always surrounded by a small entourage of unidentifiable assistants (three on each side). In a similar position as the guardians of the lower floors, there are another four figures in the corners facing the four secondary directions. Each of these figures represents a deity with four arms: two placed on the head with the hands united in prayer and the other two at the chest height in the same gesture of reverence. There are a total of eight such figures. Those facing the four main directions are seated higher than those facing the four intermediate directions.

For Angela Howard, this four-armed deity is a Bai goddess called Honorable Victorious Mother of the Buddha (*Zun Sheng Fo Mu*),



or Mother of Great Buddha (Da Fo Mu), which is the most sacred image in Bai's burials. The deity called in Chinese "Zun Sheng Fo Mu (Honourable victorious mother of the Buddha), is the same called *Usnisa Vijaya*, which is precisely one of the most important persons invoked in the *dharami* pillars built in Tang China, because it was believed that the *Usnisa Vijaya Dharami* could help sentient beings prolong life and to destroy the hardships of *samsara* (the eternal cycle of life) and the realms of hell. This would indicate the presence of this goddess both in the main part of the pillar (through her invocation) and in the upper part (where her figure appears). Usually, but not always, she is represented with eight arms.

The presence of a goddess in this pillar points out to local beliefs which precede Buddhism because it is thought that goddesses and women had a paramount importance in the primitive religion of the Bai. The Bai people call heaven Mother Heaven, because in their early conceptions of the universe, heaven symbolizes "motherhood". In their creation myths of how the heavens, the sun, the moon, the wind, the rain, all were created or dominated by goddesses. Among them, Avalokitesvara is called Mother Avalokitesvara, and in their legends she is the first ancestral mother who separated heaven and earth, being continually remembered for her contribution in establishing the kingdoms of Nanzhao and Dali (Zhang 2016). Other legends tell us that, after defeating a demon, she asked only for a piece of land big enough to extend her prayer's mat, and when it was granted, she enlarged and enlarged the mat until it occupied the present surface of the Dali valley, where she allowed the Bai people to live. In others myths, she is seen giving the grains to humankind, establishing the main Bai festivals, defeating their enemies, and so on.

During the funerals of some ethnic groups speaking Tibetan-Burmese languages, related to the Bai, the most important ritual is to lead the soul of the deceased to the ancestral lands. It is thought that most of these peoples lived originally in Northwest China, whence they migrated centuries ago to Southwest China and Burma. Shamans and religious specialists have preserved the itinerary their ancestors followed during their migrations because after death they must guide the souls of

the deceased along this same itinerary, in the opposite direction, to join the ancestors in their original land. Ancient Hindu funerary conceptions also included the belief that every day the god of the death, Yama, sent his dogs to look for the people who were going to die, guiding them to paradise where their ancestors were feasting.

Both Tibeto-Burman and Hindu traditions said that after death the soul must follow an spiritual path, a path that could resemble this ascent to Mount Meru shown by the pillar, the itinerary followed in a mandala, or the Naxi scriptures of the "Road to Heaven".

These ideas seem to be very old in the region. In the description of a funeral of the Nanzhao Kingdom, in the story called "The Palace Lamp of the Nanzhao Kingdom" it is said that "The assembled *bimo* (ritualists) chant scriptures at the king's cremation that are similar to those still used at Yi funerals" (Mair 2011: 237). One text says that "A circling phoenix shall accompany you on the road to the ancestors" (Mair 2011: 240). Then the soul of the king is summoned to follow the kings already with the ancestors. It is possible that the second part of the pillar reflected a similar ceremony. After the cremation (the clouds that rise from the *amṛta kalasa*), a phoenix accompany the soul on the road to the ancestors (under the roof), under the protection of the goddess (level 8), where (as in all paradises) all desires are satisfied (the *cintamani* jewel).

As in many other religious symbols with which man seeks to lean out, understand or protect himself against forces of which he knows nothing, in this pillar we see a superimposition of motives that repeat time and again the fundamental desire of the Buddhist believer when facing death, to obtain longevity and to be reincarnated after death in the elevated realms of existence, as one step forward on the road to the Nirvana. If the vase *amṛta kalasa* of level 6 is a division, and its position in the pinnacle according to the traditions makes us think that it is, in this pillar we do not have a stupa, but two, one on top of the other, one bigger and another smaller, that repeat the same message. The lower stupa with the Sanskrit *dharaṇī* that will provide the salvation of the soul, the upper one with the image of the Victorious Mother of the Buddha. And if we have already seen that the stupas could be crowned by an

amṛta kalasa vessel or a Buddhist jewel, here each of the stupas is crowned with one of these objects.

In addition to considering that in this monument there is a duplication of concepts, we could also find that after reaching Nirvana, symbolized by the ascent of Mount Meru, and the presence of the *amṛta kalasa*, a description of that Nirvana is made. There we could find that indigenous and Buddhist traditions are mixed. Here a building is described. People live in the buildings, they can be the ancestors (male and female) with whom the deceased meets in their enjoyment of paradise. It seems that the Nirvana of the Bai people, far from the total extinction of existence that Buddhists advocate, would be a kind of indigenous paradise where the dead meet with their ancestors, possibly under the eternal protection of the goddess that appears repeatedly on the eighth level.



Level 9- The jewel and the lotus

The summit of the pillar consists of a *cintamani* jewel on a lotus. Like a shining jewel, the summit alerts us to the brightness of the Buddha's teaching. It is a synonym for complete enlightenment. It is also striking that this composition evokes the famous Buddhist mantra "*om mani padme hum*", usually translated as "Look! The jewel in the lotus!" Just as the flags and prayer wheels of Tibetan Buddhists throw this prayer into space millions of times for the wind to carry it to all corners of the universe, this pillar conveys the sacred message from its top. All the other places, on this magnificent sculpture, in which we find the same motif, could equally be contributing to spread the sacred message throughout all corners of the universe.

The *cintamani* jewel which provides all desires is a very common symbol in Buddhist iconography. It is often found in the hands or in the laps of some figures, a sign that they offer it to the believer. It is also at the top of many pagodas. It is said that this jewel bestows blessings on those who suffer, for it satisfies desires, pacifies aspirations and brings a clear understanding of Buddhist law. But the jewel has also been invoked for more mundane purposes, such as providing wealth or long life. In fact, most of the Buddhist deities associated with wealth carry a jewel, to provide treasures, clothing and food to the petitioners and to eliminate sickness and suffering.

Curiously, the shape of the *cintamani* jewel is similar in China to that of a peach, which in Chinese tradition is the fruit of immortality. The use of the *cintamani* jewel crowning this second stupa, therefore, is one more vow that Mr. Gao's wishes and aspirations could be fulfilled.



This brief description of the main elements and characters of Kunming's Dharani Pillar has led us to a simple foray into the symbolism of the most common elements of Buddhism. As in a magical tale, each level, each sculpture, each symbol, has allowed us to reveal some secrets, some aspects of Buddhist iconography previously unknown, only to suggest the existence of many other meanings that currently escape our knowledge.

Like any good description of life, the *dharani* pillar is full of suggestions that evoke the complex visual and cultural elements present in the Dali Kingdom at the beginning of the 13th century, and although they primarily speak to us of its political and religious identity, they also contribute to magnifying the history of the Gao family, recreating a universe that revolves around one of its most distinguished members. There is no doubt that political, national, religious and cultural tensions are reflected in this pillar and that a deeper study would shed light on aspects of thirteenth century Yunnan, that have so far scarcely been understood. For in this pillar are admirably combined an impeccable artistic design with a variegated symbolic content in which the multitude of religious beliefs present in Yunnan find accommodation.

For our part, we believe that the initial objective, to provide some images of the pillar and a brief explanation of its characters and objects to the non-specialist reader, has been rightly fulfilled. On the road, as Buddhist believers following the path, we discovered many signs that suggest secret symbolism, and unexpected religious evocations, that could make this art-work a key piece to understand the nature and practice of Buddhism in thirteenth century Yunnan.

We can only hope that this brief study will arouse the interest of art lovers, travelers and the general public, and that the real and mythical worlds encompassed in the pillar will be revealed in the future.

Glossary of Buddhist terms.

Amrta kalasa. A kalasa vessel which was said to contain the nectar of immortality.

Apsaras: Spirits of the clouds and waters in Buddhist mythology,

Caitya: A kind of stupa, considered dwelling of the gods

Cintamani jewel or jewel that provides all desires.

Dharani: A homage or invocation of the deity, followed by a request to act.

Dharma. Buddhist law or teachings.

Dhyana. Contemplation

Garuda: Sacred bird in India.

Harmika: Residence of gods or ancestors.

Jata: Plaited hair.

Kalasa: Vessels used to store the water in some rituals, sacred water to be distributed among the devotees.

Karma. Merit gained or lost in previous existences that determine the present fate.

Khakkara: Monk staff.

Lokapalas: Four Heavenly Kings.

Mandala: A symbolic representation of the universe common to the religions of India,

Mantra: Magic syllables or names of deities, without words of homage or a request to act.

Makara: Marine monster

Meru or Sumeru. A golden mountain at the center of the universe that connects heaven and earth

Mudras: Gestures of the hands with symbolic meaning.

Naga: Snakes living in the ocean at the foot of Mount Meru

Nirvana: Buddhist Paradise. The end of the cycle of reincarnations.

Pagoda: A funeral monument, sometimes octagonal in shape, representing the eightfold path that points out the moral conduct.

Patra: Alms' bowl.

Samsara. Eternal cycle of births and reincarnations that only ends when reaching nirvana

Sistrum: A kind of monk stick.

Stupa: Funerary monuments built to guard the relics of Buddha or his disciples.

Sutra: Buddhist scriptures.

Thankas: Tibetan portable paintings.

Uptala. Flower. A kind of flower that, as the lotus, rises from mud.

Vajrapanis: Yaksa demons converted in protectors.

Yaksa: Buddhist demons.

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